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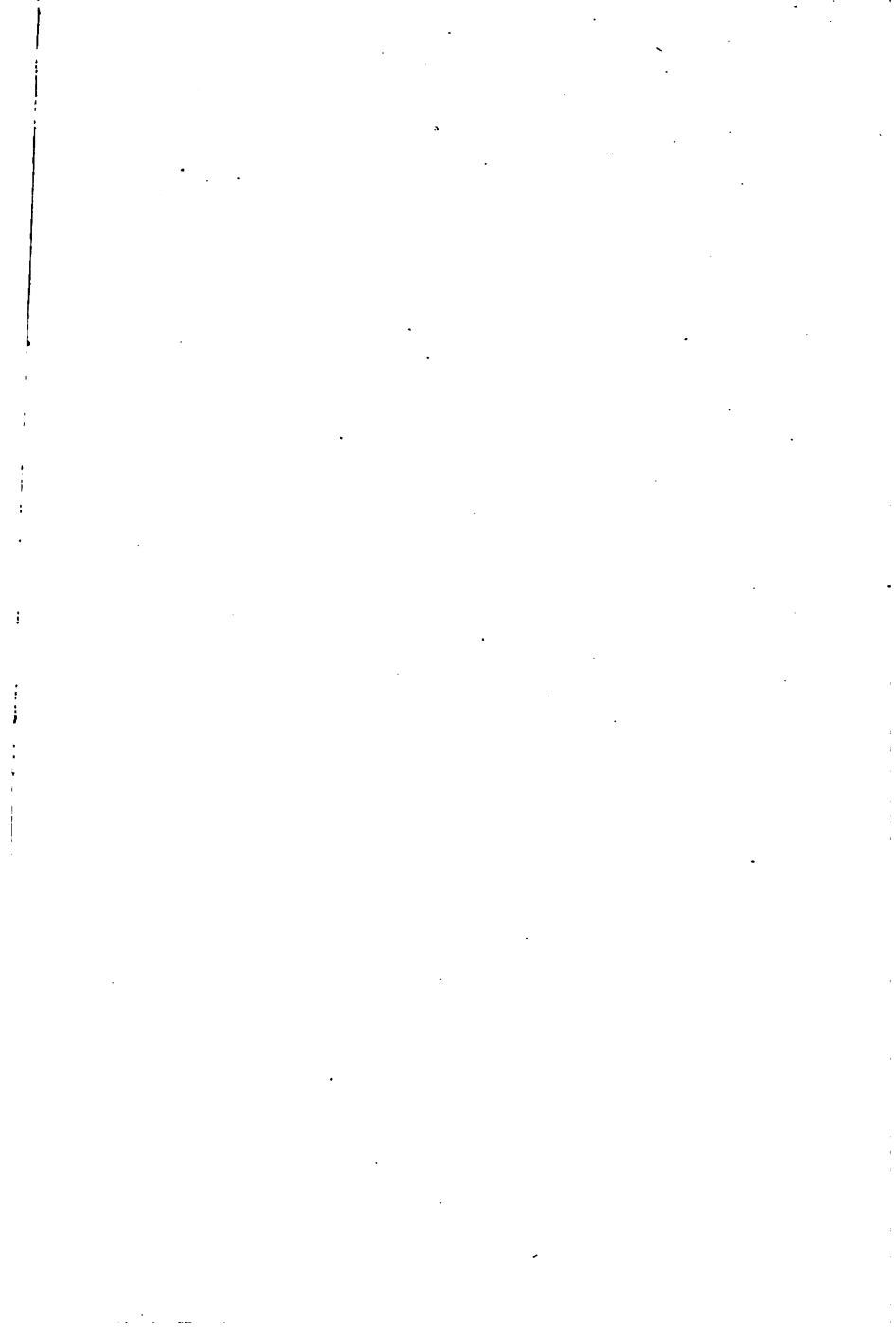
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THE LORDS OF CUNINGHAM

THE LORDS OF CUNINGHAM

BY

WILLIAM ROBERTSON,

*Author of "The Kings of Carrick," "Historical Tales and Legends
of Ayrshire," Etc.*



ALEXANDER GARDNER

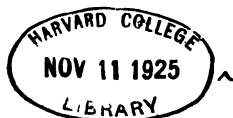
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P R E F A C E .

FROM the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries Ayrshire was the chosen home of the blood feud. National troubles weakened the central authority to such an extent that the barons, turbulent and jealous, took occasion by the hand; and when their energies were not called into exercise by the necessity for presenting common front to common foe, they sought to advantage themselves by carrying on destructive and desolating strife with their neighbours and rivals.

In Ayrshire these feuds were prosecuted with wonderful tenacity. In 1448, the office of King's Bailie in Cuningham, long held by the Cuninghames—Earls of Glencairn—was bestowed upon the eldest son of the first Baron Montgomerie. Incensed at the slight, Glencairn took the field; and the Montgomeries, nothing loath, sacked and burned the Castle of Kerslaw. In 1565, the King's coroner for Renfrewshire, William Cunninghame of Craighs, was set upon and wounded by the Master of Montgomerie; and two years later the rivals met in combat, to the loss of life and the accentuating of the rivalry. Arbitration was resorted to, and the Earl of Eglinton secured in the bailiership of the northern division of Ayrshire. But, so far from meliorating the existing conditions, the only result was to drive the Cuninghame family to continued reprisal.

Further mediation begat a truce ; but isolated instances of revenge, at the instance of both parties, were perpetrated at irregular intervals. Edward Cuninghame of Auchenharvie was slain in 1526, and Archibald Cuninghame of Waterstoun two years later ; upon which, according to a Manuscript History of the Family of Eglinton, " William, Master of Glencairn, raised all his friends and allies in the shire of Renfrew, and made a furious inroad into Cuningham, destroying in their progress not only houses and lands belonging to the Montgomeries, but the very corn fields, and finally burnt Eglinton Castle itself, with all the ancient records of the family."

How the feud again slumbered, how anew it broke out, and after what fashion it culminated in a crowning act of tragedy, will be found in the pages that follow.

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THE LORDS OF CUNNINGHAM.

CHAPTER I.

SIR NEILL MONTGOMERIE SETS HIS WIFE A-THINKING.

IT was the spring time. Nature was in her best and brightest. The trees had awakened from their winter sleep, and were pushing out their buds to meet the vernal influences half-way. The birds that had been silent when the snow lay upon the ground, and that had cowered—poor little things!—under the shelter of the copse and the greenwood when the rude winds of March were whistling and blustering and bidding the winter die hard, had emerged from their seclusion, and were tuning their voices for the chorus of the early summer. The ivy that had clung tenaciously to the walls, and to the gnarled trunks of the fathers of the forest all winter, and that had resisted all the efforts of the winds and the rains to loosen its hold, was putting out new shoots and setting out and upward for fresh conquest over the stone and lime and the tree-trunks to which it had lent its softening presence.

Everything in Nature was getting lighter and brighter and more radiant. The swallows and the starlings were coming, and the errant landrail that had wintered in the north of Africa had resumed his ceaseless note in the lengthening grass.

Amid one of the thousand fair scenes, made the fairer by the soft touch of the sweet spring time, was that of which the house of Lainshaw was the centre. A grey old pile, itself unpicturesque, save for its suggestiveness. It was like the other peels of the

country side. Built for security as well as comfort, its walls were thick, its gates heavy, its doors strong. Strength was in its bulwarks rather than beauty. It was a dwelling meet for the times : and the times were rude. It was a house for the baron and the retainer, and the clash and clang of arms ; where one looked naturally—nor failed in looking—for the oaken hall and the stands of arms and of armour, reflecting, when the nights were long, the uncertain glare of the dancing log fire ; a house built against surprise, and to resist the on-coming of the foe.

But, for the time being, Lainshaw sat amid a scene of peace, and was itself peaceful. Its doors stood open to all the world. No watchman watched upon its walls, no armed retainers added to its strength. A flag floated above it, but it was the flag of welcome and not of defiance. Its cannon projected, but their grim lips were silent and spake not.

If there was one home in all North Ayrshire in the latter end of the sixteenth century where one might have looked for peace, it was this same Lainshaw. Elsewhere the never-slumbering feud between the Earl of Glencairn and the Earl of Eglinton—between the Cuninghames and the Montgomeries—was proceeding apace and intermittently. But the laird of Lainshaw was a cadet of the house of Eglinton, and his wife, the Lady Elizabeth, was a daughter of the house of Aiket ; and Aiket was in possession of the Cuninghames, and held by as staunch a Cuninghame as ever made war upon the Montgomeries. Their union had been one of love as well as of policy. Policy had mingled with the love, though neither Sir Neill nor his spouse had ever known of it. Theirs was the love, and that was enough for them.

For a hundred years and more the feud had been going on, almost without stay or hindrance. Incalculable trials and evils had followed in its train. Castles had been sacked and had blazed, and homesteads had been devastated. The knight had been slain on the field of combat, the farmer in his stackyard, the cottager by his door, the hind on the braes. Intrigue had

been met by intrigue, plot had begotten plot. No man's life had been safe when the avengers of blood were abroad on their stern mission. The keeps of Aiket and of Robertland had been sacked, and their inmates driven out of their shelter, or slain beneath the shadow of their homes. Even Eglinton Castle itself had not escaped destruction ; for the Cuninghames, with Glencairn at their head, had come upon it unawares. The Earl had escaped. He had marked the advance of the Cuninghames by the curling smoke which ascended to the sky as they fired the homesteads on their line of march, but the fair mansion itself, sitting calm and strong by the placid banks of Lugton, had been given over to the flames that had swept its interior with the besom of destruction, and reduced the ancestral home of the chief of the Montgomeries to ashes.

But now that a Montgomerie had wedded a Cuninghame, and in the children that sat around the table, the blood of the rival families for the supremacy of North Ayrshire had been mingled, the bands of marauders gave Lainshaw a wide berth. Occasionally a wandering Montgomerie looked in as he passed, but it pained him to see the hospitality of the house dispensed by a daughter of Aiket ; and betimes a Cuninghame made a friendly call, but departed only half-pleased that the daughter of Aiket had so far forgotten herself as to wed one of the hated race of Montgomerie. Sir Neill did not trouble himself. He was happy in his wife and family, and in the peace he enjoyed he did not begrudge others their share of embroilment, but went on calmly doing his duty as became the Laird of Lainshaw.

If Lady Elizabeth was not equally satisfied, she had at least up till now succeeded in hiding her dissatisfaction. The feud between the two families was never referred to. Sir Neill had attempted to discuss it once ; the reception which his attempt met did not encourage him to renew the discussion. And, though Sir Neill knew it not, the young Montgomeries that called him father were versed in all the lore of Glencairn, and mourned and grieved over the wrongs done to their mother's house by the

followers and friends of the Earl of Eglinton. Lady Elizabeth had depths that had never been fathomed. Her husband had not even attempted to sound them.

"I bring you tidings, Lady Elizabeth," said Sir Neill, addressing his spouse, as they sat together by the evening fire. "Tidings, too, that will interest you. The Court sits at Stirling—you know that?"

"Yes, I know that, and I am afraid it hardly interests me. I am not myself a welcome guest at the foot of the throne. Nor can I conceive that either the Cuninghames or the Montgomeries should care very much where the Court sits—the King has treated them as if they were of no account."

"True, but the minds of monarchs change, and we must change with them, Elizabeth. The Earl of Glencairn has regained the influence he has lost; and who knows whether the Earl of Eglinton may not be on the eve of entering anew upon the influence that once belonged to the Montgomeries?"

"Perhaps he may, but that does not concern me much."

"How do you know Elizabeth? There is much in the turn of events; and it is concerning that very matter that I wish to speak. The Earl of Eglinton has been summoned to Stirling."

"He has?"

"Yes, a week hence he sets out on his journey to the city of the rock."

"That may be, Sir Neill, but I am not going to travel in his train. He is not likely to forget that I am a daughter of the house of Glencairn."

"You are indeed, Elizabeth, a daughter of the house of Glencairn, but you are also a daughter of the house of Eglinton; and when you married me—"

"When I married you, I did not any the less cease to be my father's child. Nor have the Montgomeries forgotten it. Never since I came to Lainshaw, five and twenty years ago, has an Earl of Eglinton crossed the threshold, and never once, all these long years, have I been invited to Eglinton."

"True, Elizabeth, but better late than never. And therewith is connected the tidings I am going to impart to you. The Earl of Eglinton is coming here."

"Not to Lainshaw, surely?"

"Yes, to Lainshaw. As he is passing on his way to Stirling he will be our guest."

Lady Elizabeth started, then grew thoughtful. The embroidery work on which her nimble fingers had plied dropped from her hands; and insensibly she fixed her gaze upon the fire.

"Why, Elizabeth," observed her husband, "the tidings don't seem to over-joy you. I thought you would have been otherwise disposed."

"You do not know yet," returned Lady Elizabeth, quietly, "how I am disposed. I am thinking."

The Lady of Lainshaw continued looking into the fire. The gaze was an unconscious one. She saw the bright flames and the glowing embers, but she saw them as though she saw them not. Wrapt in contemplation, she seemed a moment to have forgotten her husband's presence; but glancing sideways at him, she noticed a darker look than usual on his face; and composing herself, she took up her embroidery and resumed her work.

"We must really, Elizabeth," said Sir Neill, "try and forget the past. I have tried to forget it, and to me the past is now but a memory and not an influence. And I hope that you too, will cease to remember what has been, and that you will give the Earl of Eglinton the greeting that it becomes us to give him. He is my chief, the head of the house of Montgomerie, and I am bound to him by the ties of kinship. Even were it not so, the Earl is but a young man, and has never in any way, or in any degree whatever, wronged you or yours."

"No, Sir Neill; that is true. He has never wronged me, but I cannot forget the past. An hour ago it was to me a sealed book, but you have opened the book and I cannot forbear to read it. I thought I had done with my recollections, but you have recalled them from their slumber. I cannot forget—I

never shall forget so long as I live—how the father of this Earl came to Aiket with all his men about him, and bid my father surrender the old home. I was but a little girl then, but I remember it all now as if it had been yesterday. It was a futile assault he made, but do you think I can forget that my father's brother was slain in the encounter? I saw him die."

"Elizabeth, that is an old story. More than two score of years have passed since then, and the old Earl is with his fathers. Besides, when you remember the assault on Aiket, have you forgotten the vengeance of the Cuninghames? Have you forgotten how Glencairn and his men stood on the banks of the Lugton and watched the castle of Eglinton wrapped in fire and in smoke?"

"No, I have not forgotten that either. Memories die too hard for that. But you say the Earl of Eglinton comes here this day eight days?"

"Yes, as he passes on his way to Stirling. He dines here and goes hence immediately afterwards; and he bids me, in the message I have received from him, give you his greeting and his assurance of his respect."

"Why could he not have left us alone, Neill?" said Lady Elizabeth. "Our way of life has been quiet and peaceful. We have not concerned ourselves actively with the ongoing of the feud. Why should the Earl intrude himself upon our quiet, and awaken memories that have slumbered so long?"

"There is no need, Elizabeth, why these memories should be awakened by the Earl's coming. Let our reception of him rather be the earnest that the memories are dead. You know you are a Montgomerie now."

"I am a Montgomerie in name. I became a Montgomerie by choice, and I have never regretted it. But I am a Cuninghame in blood. I never was more alive to it than now; and, Neill, you are putting a torch to the heather in inviting the Earl of Eglinton to Lainshaw."

"I have not invited him, Elizabeth. He is coming here freely,

and of his own accord ; and I shall never, while breath remains in my body, turn my back upon the chief of the house to which I have the honour to belong, and whose call I am bound in good faith to obey."

"And you think that I am to forget the past and welcome to Lainshaw the son of the man who let the devil loose among my kinsfolk, giving their homes to the flames and themselves to the sword?"

"Elizabeth, Elizabeth ! For my sake—for heaven's sake—let these bygones be bygones. Will you not let them sleep for one single day ? They have slumbered well nigh a quarter of a century—why recall them now ? The Earl must have the welcome that is his due."

"And so he shall, if come he must. He will not find me remiss in my duty as a hostess. I shall give him fitting greeting. You say he comes here to dinner ?"

"Yes."

"And resumes his journey when he has dined?"

"Yes."

"Does he travel alone?"

"Alone—save that he will be accompanied by his body servants."

"Very well, Sir Neill. He shall have proper welcome. Your wishes shall be attended to."

Left alone, Lady Elizabeth, once more let her embroidery fall upon her knee and resumed her train of thought. What was there in the dancing flames to darken the light on her face ? Nothing. The darkness was the reflected darkness in her soul. The past ! Why should the past have been so recalled ? She had thought it slumbering—it never was more wide-awake than now. What new duties had its awakening evolved ? To what did it call her ? She was a Cuninghame—a Cuninghame of the Cuninghames. The family honour was in her hands—what if she were to compromise it ? What if it were to suffer ?

And yet she was a Mongomerie. The wife of a Montgomerie.

Her children were Montgomeries. And when she passed away they would be incorporated with the Montgomeries, would turn their backs on Glencairn and their faces to Eglinton.

She had thought that the past and she had parted company ; and yet, here it was before her with all its vivid memories. The old stories, the tales and traditions of her child days, in which she had been nursed, were dancing before her with every flicker of the firelight. Fierce the family war, and fateful and baleful the incidents that had followed in its train ! From the mists—the dark mists—of her early years she saw stand out in its ruins the Castle of Kerelaw, once a tower of strength, and she recalled the story of its burning at the hands of the men of Eglinton. She remembered now, as she had not remembered these many years, the ill-will begotten by the transference of the bailieship of the district from Glencairn to Eglinton. And many a scene and many an incident besides.

These things dead ! Why, they had never been more alive than now. One by one they trooped past—every wrong done, every blow struck, every conflagration kindled, every consummation reached, every life sacrificed. They jostled one another as they emerged from their hiding-places. And Lady Elizabeth's brow darkened the more, and the hot blood of the Cuninghames flowed the faster because of the long sleep that had preceded the awaking.

And now the Earl was coming—the Earl of Eglinton—the chief of the Montgomeries ! And she was to give him welcome ! But whether as became the wife of Sir Neill Montgomerie of Lainshaw, or as the daughter of the old Laird of Aiket, a daughter of the house of Glencairn ?

CHAPTER II.

THE LADY OF LAINSHAW SETS OTHERS A-THINKING.

“ COME hither, Isabel,” said Lady Elizabeth the following morning, “ I desire to speak with you.”

Isabel—Isabel Boyd—the person addressed, obeyed. Like her mistress, she gave her sympathies to the Cuninghames. Her father had ridden a yeoman in the train of the old laird of Aiket. He had followed him in his rides, on his raids, on his journeys. And she remembered still, how, in the days long passed away, he had returned to tell of the deeds done on the Montgomeries. Full well, too, she remembered one fateful day when he was brought home dying from a wound inflicted by a lance borne by one of the retainers of Eglinton. She had never forgotten that; and though when Lady Elizabeth came to Lainshaw, a fair young bride, she had accompanied her as her maid, she had never been able to withdraw her sympathies from her kith and kin, or her antipathies from the race of Montgomerie.

But the long piping times of peace, so far as Lainshaw was concerned, had converted the feud to little more than a mental heritage. She was a Cuninghame in sympathy still; but her animosity to Eglinton was latent, and she had no conscious desire that it should be otherwise.

"Sit down, Isabel, I've something to say to you. No, not over there. Sit down here beside me."

Isabel wondered, but wondering, obeyed. Lady Elizabeth was her divinity, and she owed her, and gave her, implicit obedience.

"The Earl of Eglinton comes here next week."

The information thus quietly imparted was the prelude to a brief but emphatic silence. Isabel's mind did not at once respond to the significance of what she had been told. But as it gradually filtered down into her comprehension, and as she looked at her mistress and read its import in the light of her eyes, and in the flush upon her forehead, she was quick to divine that there was more in the simple communication than lay upon the surface. And having divined that, she began to have a dawning perception of the full import.

"The Earl of Eglinton, did you say, my lady?"

"Yes."

"Coming here—to this house—to Lainshaw?"

"Yes."

"I never thought, Lady Elizabeth, to see the Earl of Eglinton beneath this roof."

"Nor did I, Isabel. All these years Lainshaw has almost been shunned by Montgomeries and by Cuninghames alike. I have seen it. I have felt it. I have borne it in silence, content and satisfied if it were better for our happiness and peace, and for the well-being of our children. It has been a long calm; but now it is about to be broken, and I feel, Isabel—I hardly know what I feel—I feel as I have not felt these five and twenty years past. They all seem blotted out. They look like a dream to me, and I am afraid to awake and find that I have spent a pleasant quarter of a century in dreamland."

"But what can your ladyship do? And why should you so concern yourself? If Sir Neill invites the Earl to this house, or if the Earl thinks to come of his own free will, come he will, and there can be no gainsaying him; and we must even do the best we can."

"We must even do the best we can, Isabel, must we?"

Isabel in reply shrugged her shoulders, and then looked at her mistress. And she saw an unwonted look in her mistress's eyes.

"Must we?" repeated Lady Elizabeth; "yes, I suppose we must, but what is the best we can do?"

"Whatever it pleases your ladyship to do—that is the best."

"I've seen the day, Isabel, and you have seen the day, when such a chance as this would not have been permitted to pass, by a daughter of the house of Cuninghame. Times change, and we with them; and mayhap I shall have to put up with the indignity as best I can. I wish I could. But it ill becomes me, wife though I be to Sir Neill Montgomerie, to cry welcome to the son of the murderer of my uncle."

"But what else can you do, Lady Elizabeth? You cannot bring shame upon Sir Neill by slighting his guest, be he gentle or simple."

"Isabel, I thought you had been cast in a more rigid mould than that, and that your memories like mine, would have quickened your perception and your impulse. You cannot have forgotten your father. But whether you have or not, is it right, is it fitting, that I, the bearer of so many sad memories impressed on me by the misdeeds and the wrong-doings, and the treachery of the Montgomeries of Eglinton, should forget what is due to the house of my father, and to the name of Glencairn?"

Isabel was loath to suggest or to give counsel. She read her mistress's mind, and instinctively shrank from the reading.

"Your ladyship," she replied, "knows best what is due to your ladyship's position; but I fear me you cannot do otherwise than give the Earl hospitable welcome."

"Yes, I must give him hospitable welcome—there is no alternative to that; I have given my word to Sir Neill, and I cannot go back from it. But what I wish to know now is this—is the hospitable welcome to be the sole result of the Earl of Eglinton's visit to Lainshaw?"

Isabel would not suggest. Whatever was in Lady Elizabeth's mind must come forth of her own free will. There would be no divided responsibility.

"What other result can your ladyship desire?"

Lady Elizabeth took time to reply. She did not like the reserve that had come over her attendant. She had hoped for active sympathy and suggestion; she had met nothing more substantial than temporising. But she still hoped to bring Isabel to her aid.

"Believe me, Isabel," she said—and she spoke so earnestly that Isabel was fain to believe her—"I would to Heaven I could forget the past; I would I could blot out now and for ever the remembrance of the days that are long gone by; but since last night—I feel I can trust you, Isabel, for you as well as I were reared in another school than that of the Montgomeries—since last night, I say, and in the silence of the night, all the stories I was told as a child; all the wrongs done to the Cuninghames by the

Montgomerys ; all that we ever suffered at their hands—all have rushed upon me with the force of a driving torrent. I tried to fight them back, but up they came one by one. I shut my eyes to them, but I saw them. I steeled my heart against them, but they entered in and they have the mastery. And now I feel that I am the creature of predestination. I am appointed to the discharge of a mission. I feel now that I have been asleep for a century, and that I have only now awaked to a sense of duty neglected all through that long slumber. I have tried to fight back my predestination, but it has come upon me with the force and power of a conviction."

Isabel saw her mistress was in earnest, in dead, grim earnest. The earnestness was in her voice, in her eyes, in the set muscles of her face. The attendant felt the strength of the waters on the outer circle of the whirlpool, and resolved to beware. Otherwise she must be engulfed.

"I have not lived to forget, Isabel," resumed Lady Elizabeth. "I cannot, if I would, obliterate the sense of all the wrongs done by the Montgomerys to the house of Glencairn. I cannot banish from my recollection the smouldering, blackened ruins of the house of Kerelaw. I can never forget Edward Cuninghame of Auchenharvie slain in the open fields, basely and cruelly. I cannot but remember—would to God I could do otherwise ! how the Earl of Eglinton snatched the baillery of Cunningham from the Earl of Glencairn. These things possess me, Isabel. I cannot get rid of them. They dominate me ; they drive me on ; they impel me against my judgment. They point the pathway to duty, and as a daughter of Aiket I must follow it."

The deeper plunged the Lady Elizabeth, the nearer the shore struggled the attendant. She began to fear the intensity of her mistress's passion, and temporised the more.

"Oh, my lady," she replied, "bethink you what you are doing, and to what the path you are entering upon may lead ! Think of the happiness you are throwing into the scale ; think of your husband and family ; think of the future ! With you I would

gladly have revenge ; but is life's happiness so valueless that you can afford to throw it away ? ”

“ Better wreck happiness, Isabel, than wreck honour. Happiness would vanish for ever from my breast were it purchased at the sacrifice of honour and what is due to the house of Glencairn.”

“ I am in your ladyship's hands. I am ready to do whatever you bid me. But ere you ask me to go further, ere you go further yourself, ere you do anything that may react to your undoing, let us take counsel with the heads of the house of Cuninghame. Let us act on their advice, with their consent, and with their assistance, if we are to act at all. We have six days wherein to resolve—let us then delay any and all preparations until you have sought counsel.”

“ Why—what need to seek counsel ? ”

“ Because, my lady, in the multitude of counsellors there is safety. For heaven's sake, do nothing rash ! ”

“ Why involve others ? ” Lady Elizabeth retorted ; “ If there is danger impending, why should I share it ? ”

“ It is because there is danger impending your ladyship must share it. What have you to revenge ? Why should you become the avenger of blood for the wrongs inflicted upon others ? Why should it be yours to retaliate ? ”

“ What have I to remember, Isabel ? Say rather, what have I to forget ? And why should I not retaliate ? What is a duty to the Cuninghames as a family is a duty to each member of the Cuninghame family.”

“ I beseech you, Lady Elizabeth, not to be rash. You will undo yourself. Consult the Earl of Glencairn.”

“ The Earl is in the south country.”

“ Then consult his brother, Sir John. Bid Robertland, and Corsehill, and Aiket, and Clonbeith to your counsels, and let them determine the future. This is no quarrel for women—leave it to those whose duty it is to remember the past.”

“ I tell you I must bear my share. I cannot understand why and how I am so moved. The spirit has moved me to do and

to dare in the honour of the family. I would have driven the spirit out—I tried to drive it out—I prayed to God to drive it out, but I failed ; and now I know that I am acting a predestined part. But I shall take your advice. I shall not act alone.”

The interview terminated. Isabel went to her duties and to her fears ; Lady Elizabeth to nurse her sense of wrongs done to the Cuninghames, and to arrogate to herself the mission of a destroying angel. As yet she had no defined project in her mind. Revenge ! that was the one thing. It was to that the finger of her destiny pointed. It was to that God had called her. She felt it ; and feeling it, she yielded herself to the devil, in the belief that Providence was beckoning her the way to destruction. Her ideas of action were as yet in solution. She was not even the recipient of her own secret. Only the necessity for action was crystalized.

The suggestions of the lady of Lainshaw, indistinct as they were, yet dark and ominous in that they were so indistinct, had created a panic in the mind of Isabel Boyd. Her mistress had undergone a transformation. But yesterday she was the wife of Sir Neill Montgomerie, without motive or ambition, save for the well-being of the household over which she presided. To-day she was the veritable incarnation of a family hatred, the recipient of the legacy of a century's wrongs. She was still the wife of Sir Neill Montgomerie, but her wifeness had been dethroned from its altitude, and in its place was the daughterhood of Aiket. She had become a child of the feud.

Isabel saw the danger. But what could she do ? Betray her mistress ? She would die first. Thank heaven, it was not her's to think ; far less was it hers to interfere. She could appreciate Lady Elizabeth's hatred of the Montgomeries. She shared in the hatred. But she feared the consequences. What these were to be she could neither discern nor decipher. These were but the handwriting on the wall, seen dimly in the projected gloom of the coming night. But seen.

The darkness, too, enwrapped Lady Elizabeth. All the light

she had to guide her was lurid, and uncertain. She hardly knew to which hand to turn. For years she had been to all intents and purposes a stranger to her own relatives. Would they trust her now? Could she even trust them? Would they awake at her summons—would they respond to her call? Would they believe that she called in truth as well as in deed? Or would they remember only that she was the wife of a Montgomerie, and forget that she was a daughter of Aiket?

She must risk it. When they declined to have any dealings with her, it would be time then to act for herself, and without their aid.

The forthcoming visit of the Earl of Eglinton bestirred Sir Neill from the depths of his accustomed quiet. Determined to do honour to the chief of the Montgomeries, he set about making preparations to welcome him; and, in pursuance of his determination he was from home the following day that he might call on his friends and fellow Montgomeries to make the event notable.

Sir Neill had hardly ridden away ere Lady Elizabeth despatched Isabel Boyd with a letter to Aiket. Isabel gladly conveyed it, and rode away from Lainshaw satisfied that her mistress had acted wisely, and half hoping, half expecting that, as the result, the storm clouds might be rolled back and the threatening bolt of destruction might be averted.

The sun was westering to the gloaming when Alexander Cuninghame of Aiket responded to the summons, and met with his sister at a secluded spot at a distance from the house of Lainshaw.

"What is the meaning of this?" quoth Aiket, as he kept tryst, and drew from his pocket the missive his sister had sent him.

"The meaning is plain enough to anybody who can read it—or will be shortly," replied Lady Elizabeth, as she led the way to a thick copse, whose depths were a sufficient security from prying eyes. "I have sent for you to give you tidings of import and to seek counsel and assistance."

"Why should Lady Elizabeth Montgomerie seek counsel at me? Can you not consult with your husband?"

"Not on this enterprise. The Earl of Eglinton comes to this house a week hence."

Aiket looked his sister in the face, and caught the meaning of the simple announcement. He saw the unwonted light in her eyes; he read a double and a deeper meaning in the sound of her voice. But he replied—

"Wherein does this concern me, that the chief of your husband's family should visit one of his near relations? You do not mean to invite me to the banquet, do you?"

"No, not to the banquet, Alexander."

"Well—what then?"

"Are you a Cuninghame, Alexander, and do you require to put such a question?"

"Yes, I am a Cuninghame, nor ashamed of it either; but I fail yet to see what interest I can have in what you tell me."

"Have you forgotten what the Cuninghames owe to the Montgomeries?"

"No, Elizabeth, by the heaven above us, I forget nothing. But you, Elizabeth—you are a Montgomerie?"

"I am the wife of a Montgomerie but no truer Cuninghame than I draws the breath of life. Else I had not brought you hither."

"Why, then, have you brought me hither? I am still at a loss to comprehend your meaning."

"I thought it would have been otherwise, Alexander. Am I not pointing you to the way of vengeance?"

"It is impossible, Elizabeth. It cannot be. You cannot mean that you are betraying your husband's relative and the chief of his house?"

Lady Elizabeth flashed out indignantly—"Have I not told you that I am a Cuninghame of the Cuninghames? Why, then, should you accuse me of acting the part of a traitor, when I am pointing out the way to vengeance upon an enemy to Glen-

cairn? Who is Lord Eglinton that I should shew him mercy? Is he not the head of a house that has done the Cuninghames irreparable, irretrievable injury? Have you forgotten, and must I remind you, what he and his have done to the detriment of Glencairn? And will he not within a week be on his way to Stirling to promote his own interest at the expense of ours?"

"And if he be, Elizabeth, what then?"

"Do you require a woman's wits to suggest, Alexander, what you should do? Is memory so dead within you? Is the past blotted out, and for ever? Or must I be left to pursue my way unaided? For rest assured, Alexander, that vengeance must be done, and shall be done whether it is done by you or not."

"For God's sake, Elizabeth, think! Think what you are doing. Think, ere it be too late."

"Think! I have thought, aye, and I had all but resolved to act alone, and without taking counsel with you or any other. But it is not meet that it should be said that the hand of a woman hath done it."

"Your boldness staggers me, Elizabeth. But what is it that you suggest? What is it you would have me to do?"

"Do what the Montgomeries would do, were the Earl of Glencairn in their hands. Would they hesitate? Would they be staggered by the boldness of a suggestion? Did they pause to think when they slew Auchenharvie in cold blood? And should we hesitate when Providence puts such an opportunity in our hand? Should we not rather grasp the occasion, and transfer the balance of vengeance to our own side?"

"Aye, Elizabeth, but nevertheless it is the boldness of the project that alarms me. I will take counsel with our friends, and you shall hear from me ere long. You will leave this matter in our hands?"

"How can I give you such a promise unless I know what you will do?"

"We will do what is right, and you may trust us safely. We will not fail in our duty."

"Then in your hands be the enterprise, and see that you fail not."

Ere parting, Cuninghame of Aiket and Lady Elizabeth agreed to meet again in three days. The intervening period would give the former time to consult his fellow Cuninghames and resolve upon such a course of action as they should consider fitting in the circumstances.

CHAPTER III.

THE CUNINGHAMES IN COUNCIL RESOLVE TO ACT.

THE castle of Aiket, in the upland parish of Dunlop, and not far from the confines of Renfrewshire, stood in the heart of the lands and the strength of Glencairn. All around stretched the domains of the Cuninghames. Theirs' were the hills and valleys, the rivers and the creeks of water; and over the whole country-side they ruled in undisputed supremacy. Aiket Castle was on the banks of the Glazert Burn. It had its memories, and these went far back in the history of its grey walls—back to the days of the Crusades when—ere yet the family strife had broken out in North Ayrshire—Cuninghames and Montgomeries met in friendly intercourse. The peasant knew and told by the log-fire, the tale of the perfidy of a daughter of Aiket whose lover went forth to the Holy Land to do battle with the Paynim; and the peasant's family circle cowered the closer round the fire as he narrated how the ghost of the mailed crusader entered at the noon of night, and from under the glare of the lamps, and from amid the revelry of the marriage feast, bore the bride away in his arms.

That was but one of Aiket's memories. It had never failed in its duty to Glencairn. All through the feud it had stood up in its strength on behalf of the Cuninghames; and now that a family council was required, it was to Aiket that the Cuninghames came.

The Earl of Glencairn was not in the west land. Had he been, there would in all probability have been no story to tell. For he was in favour with the Sovereign, and too much alive to his own interests to court, by any overt act, the displeasure of the monarch. In his absence, the heads of the various branches of the house had perforce to do without his advice or assistance.

And to Aiket they repaired, the home of Alexander Cuninghame. The Earl's brother, John, rode thither from Kilmaurs. From Robertland came David Cuninghame; from Corsehill, Alexander Cuninghame; from Clonbeith, John Cuninghame; and these, with the laird of Aiket himself, composed a quintette of Cuninghames with whom the family name and repute were sacred, and who regarded vengeance upon the Montgomeries a sacred duty. It was part of their heritage. Their sires had bequeathed it to them with their names and their lands. Men of the times, riders of many a fray, feudalists untamed, unquenchable in their fiery zeal, unslumbering in their antipathies, ready drawers of the sword, and foresworn to hatred of the Montgomeries and to all that belonged to the house of Eglinton—such was the character of the men met to decide upon the fate of the young chief from the banks of the Lugton.

They sat far into the Spring night. The remainder of the household had retired to rest. Nature without was hushed and reposeful; and the stars in their courses shone peacefully on the walls of Aiket. The ripple of the Glazert Burn was the only sound that wrought itself in upon the stillness; and it did it so quietly and so unostentatiously that its voice was never heard. But the five men seated around the oaken table had nothing to do with Nature as she went on her course without. Destiny was theirs, and the predestination of the feud and the fray. They were the recipients of a great hatred, and they knew that they must discharge themselves of their responsibility if they were to be true to the heritage bequeathed to them by their fathers and their dead kindred. These had fought and harried when the years were younger, and many of them had gone down in the

fray ; and if their spirits were attendant on the men seated by the oaken table when the stillness of the midnight was without, it must have been that they were there to lend their intangible aid to the participants in the family council.

The Laird of Aiket had told his story. It had been received in silence. Every word that had passed in the copse he had repeated ; and each word had sunk deep into the hearts of the listeners. They were at the opening of a new revelation, and they waited until the scroll should be unrolled that they might know what it portended.

"I have concealed nothing," said Aiket, when he had made his communication. "I promised Lady Elizabeth that I would call you together in council as to the future, so that we might resolve on the course of action we are to pursue. I have kept my word, and it is for you now to determine what is to be done."

There was a brief silence. Who was to take the initiative ?

"Robertland," resumed Aiket, "they say that age brings wisdom. You are the oldest among us—what advice have you to offer ?"

"It is a great opportunity," replied Robertland—"a great opportunity indeed, and one that is not to be set lightly aside, if it be genuine. But can Lady Elizabeth be trusted ? The wife of Sir Neill Montgomerie—is there no danger in accepting any communication from such a quarter ? May not this be a plot to lead us on to our own undoing ?"

"There is no danger," returned Aiket, leisurely. "Like you, when Lady Elizabeth first mooted this matter, I was suspicious and distrustful, for I thought it strange and unnatural that she should so devise ; but it is not more strange than true that she is staunch and faithful to her father's house. Indeed, as I have told you, she would have taken vengeance into her own hands had I not given her my assurance that we would do our duty, and act as the circumstances should seem to us to demand."

"I thought she had forgotten the family cause, and the family

honour—she and her husband have so long withdrawn themselves from the strife.”

“So they have,” rejoined Aiket, “nor would she have entered upon it now had she not been aroused by the premeditated visit of the Earl.”

“Strange, is it not,” replied Robertland, “that the family blood should have so asserted itself after so long a time? But I presume she has counted the cost, so that we may take things as they are, and consider the future. And it seems to me that what we have need to consider, is not whether we should avail ourselves of the opportunity thus placed within our reach, but how best to avail ourselves of that opportunity with least danger to ourselves and to Lady Elizabeth Montgomerie.”

“Always bearing in mind,” said Corsehill, “that any overt act against the Earl of Eglinton will involve us in prolonged and serious consequences. It will not matter how secretly or how quietly we go to work, if aught befall the Earl of Eglinton in this neighbourhood, though there be not one single trace left of the deed, it will be taken for granted that our hand is in it. And therefore I am loath to act on such information—not loath to act, but loath in any way to incriminate the Lady Elizabeth.”

“There need be no incrimination,” observed Sir John, the Earl of Glencairn’s brother, and Master of Kilmaurs. “Lord Eglinton’s journey to Stirling is not a secret; he rides thither openly, and in the face of all men, and there is no reason why we should not have heard of his intended setting-out, without any conference or communication with Lady Elizabeth. She is safe in our hands. She has put herself within our power, and she is therefore doubly safe, because her trust must be repaid with secrecy as well as confidence.”

“You may rely on Lady Elizabeth with the utmost confidence. She was as true a Cunninghame, as a girl, as ever breathed, and she has fully atoned for her long lapse into quietude.”

“That I do not doubt for a moment,” Corsehill said in reply

to Aiket ; " but nevertheless I had rather the tidings had reached us through another channel."

" What can it matter how they have reached us ? " interposed Clonbeith. " The past we have nothing to do with—it is the future that we must consider. We have our information, and we must treat it as entirely apart from the manner in which we received it."

" Well," rejoined Corsehill, " I have said my say, I have told you my difficulty. You know how I feel. But now for the future, what is to be done ? "

" For my part," replied Clonbeith, who was the most hot-headed and impetuous of the group, " for my part I am ashamed that a woman should have had to point out to us the way of duty. I am tired of this inaction. We have slumbered too long ; and I hope now that we will awake as thoroughly as Lady Elizabeth has done."

Aiket turned to Robertland:

" You have not said yet what you propose ? " he said.

" What could I propose ? " returned Robertland. " What would you have me to propose ? Have we not suffered enough at the hands of the Montgomeries ? Is the country side so safe for us that we can afford to neglect such an opportunity ? Who among us dare venture to the lower streams of the Irvine, or the Garnock, or the Lugton, or to the waters of the Firth of Clyde ? You ask me what I would do ? I'll tell you, promptly and plainly. Let us do our duty, and do by the Earl of Eglinton as he and his have done by Glencairn, and as they would do by us if they but had the opportunity."

" Well said, Robertland," assented Clonbeith. " I, too, am for boot and saddle, and the letting out of blood. We have justification at hand and to spare, for anything we may do ; and therefore do not let us neglect so excellent an opportunity."

" So say I," spake Sir John of Kilmaurs. " Let us strike the iron when it is hot. Now is our hour to wipe out the record of the past ; let us avail ourselves of it lest it pass away. I am with

you for good or for evil in this enterprise, and I shall not say you nay."

"Nor shall I," added Clonbeith. "Where Lady Elizabeth shews the way, let us follow. The path may lead to danger, but it leads to duty."

"Amen!" assented Aiket, "Come what may, I pledge myself to the task."

This resolution reached, the Cuninghames discussed how best their resolution might be carried out. They talked it over in a business-like way that boded no good to the Earl of Eglinton, and finally they left it to the Laird of Aiket to communicate their intentions to Lady Elizabeth, and to arrange operations so as best to secure the end in view.

The following day Aiket informed his sister of the resolution come to. He penned the simple message, "It shall be done," and giving it to a trusty servant he bade him convey it to Lainshaw and give it into the hands of Lady Elizabeth. This the servant found it no difficult matter to do. The gates of Lainshaw stood open to all the world, and there was much coming and going in preparation for the forthcoming visit of the chief of the Montgomeries.

Lady Elizabeth, on receipt of the message, read it, trembled awhile, drew herself together, and continued the even tenor of her way. Sir Neill was happy that she had ceased to shew animosity towards the Earl of Eglinton. His name never crossed her lips in conversation with her husband, and she would not pretend to be gratified in the prospect of his visit, but she entered into all the arrangements promoted, so systematically, that Sir Neill thought he had cause to congratulate himself. In proportion as he had been displeased with the outbreak of her feudal antipathies, he was thankful that she had sent the past to slumber, and busied herself with the present and in preparation for the immediate future.

It was the immediate future that concerned her, and that was never absent from her thoughts. Outwardly calm, her mind was

in a whirl of unrest. The storm raged in the depths, though the surface was placid and smiling ; and all the while she was planning and devising for the comfort and entertainment of the guests, her mind was going ahead of the entertainment and of all the guests save one. She was two distinct characters—one to herself, to her conscience, to her God, another to those by whom she was surrounded.

Where the waterfall plunges from the rocks, the surface of the river may flow calm and undisturbed, and unbroken, though far down in the depths the waters are raging unseen. The green grass grows and waves on the slopes of the volcano, and refreshes the eye of the beholder, though the interior of the mountain groans in trouble and seethes and struggles with the fires of Erebus. It is from the clear blue sky that the white squall strikes and smites with the passion and the screaming of a Fury. So with Lady Elizabeth. The placid exterior was but the unbroken flow of the surface water at the base of the cataract ; the peaceful equanimity was nothing more than the verdure-clad slope of the volcano ; and the unbroken calm was but the blue sky whence falls the smiting blast of the white squall.

That was for the day. But there was night, actual night, night in the soul of the Lady of Lainshaw. It was when she retired to the secrecy of her own chamber that she felt what reaction meant. The secrecy of her chamber, did I say ? There was no secrecy. The deed she had projected was there, her conscience was there, the eye that never slumbers was on her, the devil was there. Strange combination ! But that is one of the weaknesses of sin—you cannot get rid of its concomitants.

The deed—It was she who had suggested it. But for her it could not be consummated. She had only to say the word and the hand of the avenger would be stayed. Could she say the word ? “No,” quoth the devil, “you are a Cuninghame, and you have wrongs, and this Earl is the foe to your house, and he will undo you if you don’t undo him, and you have pledged

yourself, and by the faith of a Cuninghame you must even keep your vow."

It was too late to go back. She could not go back. But why commit so foul a deed? "Oh," quoth the devil, "it is not you who are committing it; you are the creature of predestination; it is predestination that is pointing the way, and you cannot throw it off. Fate has you in its grasp, and Fate is another name for God; it is His work you are doing; go on and prosper. Shall there be evil in the city and the Lord hath not done it?"

If Lady Elizabeth had a stray thought of yielding, she smothered it with the remembrance of the past, and fortified herself anew with the memories of the waning years.

Yet still she could not sleep. Dreams were attendant on the night. They were creatures of the darkness. They would come to her whether she willed them or not, and she shrank from facing them. Why should she? Capable of a deed that would make men shudder, why should she shrink from a mere vision of the night? Because of her conscience, and because she feared that her lips might be unsealed when she had not command of their utterance.

And yet, she told herself, she had no definite intentions. She had only suggested. True, she had urged; but her responsibility ended there: why then should she fear to sleep? She could not go back. She had no need to go back. Her share in the enterprise was all but accomplished.

For right or wrong, in good or in ill, she had made her choice; or Fate had made it for her. Why then should she even think? She had no room for conscience. That must slumber. Sufficient for the day was the evil thereof. It must slumber meanwhile. If ever it awakened it must be bye-and-bye, and she could deal with it then.

But why should it awake at all? She was only fulfilling her mission. Her's was a mission. She was but the product of circumstances. So was the feud. So was the Earl of Eglinton.

So was the fate that awaited him. If God did not intend it, He would not permit it; and so the responsibility was His.

With such a medley of thoughts and fears and questionings, the Lady of Lainshaw fought the devil of unrest as only a determined woman could fight it, and she steeled herself for the inevitable.

And yet the days passed slowly—all too slowly. Time dragged his chariot uneasily; its wheels tarried. The days were long; the nights were a little eternity.

CHAPTER IV.

THE EARL OF EGLINTON AT LAINSHAW.

IT was the morning of the day on which the Earl of Eglinton was to arrive at the house of Lainshaw. The sun had not yet risen, nor had the darkness of the night begun to break on the eastern sky. Overhead black night reigned, and in its folds the landscape reposed. And, with the slumbering landscape, mankind was at rest and in quiet.

But those whose deeds are evil love the darkness rather than the light; and so it came about that while the country side, animate and inanimate, reposed, there were at least three persons who were awake and aroused before the dawn.

The lady of Lainshaw had lain down the previous night, but neither to sleep nor to rest. Her mind would not let her rest, and her exhausted nature and its demands were not sufficient to claim their due against the powerful forces that were warring in her breast. Fast-flying thoughts had chased one another all through the midnight hours. Stern, wild thoughts—the thoughts of a woman who was about to take part in a stern wild deed, and who yet was able, after her own fashion, to justify the deed premeditated, to herself. She was getting accustomed to look at it, and had almost steeled herself to the point of callousness. She had repeated so often that she was but doing her duty, and

nothing more than her duty, that she had come to believe it almost without questioning ; and if she questioned at all, it was to fall back on the consolation, such as it was, that it was not she who was to strike the blow. What the shape or form of the tragedy, she was ignorant of—she only knew that tragedy was meditated. And all the night long, until an hour before the day broke and the shadows fled away, she lay abed, her mind a whirlwind, a chaos of thought and of self-justification.

Lady Elizabeth rose quietly from bed, as quietly robed herself, wrapped a heavy cloak around her, drew the hood over her head so that her face should not be seen, and left her chamber. Pausing to listen a moment that all was still, she crept down the stairs cautiously—on tip-toe. Yet there was no need for that. The steps were part and parcel of the castle. They were not built to creak under the light tread of a woman. They were not built to yield to the foot of an armed man. Yet still she went warily, stealthily, as the thief glides on his errand of robbery. She passed along the passages until she reached the hall—then she gently drew back the bolts, and stepped out into the gloom of the early morning, into the darkest hour before the dawn.

There was a hush all around—a hush in the Castle, standing there so black and so solemn against the night ; a hush in the trees, their leaves hardly quivering in the faint air of the calm morning ; a hush over the Annick stream, which, not far away ran meandering by on its way to the sea. Its voice was audible, but that was all ; and it was the same voice that was always there. It did not break in on the calm—it intensified it. There was a hush in the sky overhead. It frowned, but it frowned in silence.

Lady Elizabeth left the Castle behind, and proceeded in the direction of the thicket where a week before she had met her brother of Aiket. Quickly as she had come, dark the surroundings and lone the way, she was not unobserved, for as she

reached the copse she was accosted by the lairds of Aiket and of Clonbeith.

They, too, were early astir. Creatures of the darkness, they had ridden by green lanes and fields to the trysting-place. They had crossed the sleeping country on their errand: and having disposed their horses at such a distance that the noise of their approach might not be heard, they had waited by the copse until Lady Elizabeth should meet them.

"The morning is dark, Lady Elizabeth," said Clonbeith, breaking the silence.

"It would need to be dark," she replied, "for the day that is to break will be dark too."

"Not dark to us—but to him," returned Clonbeith.

"Is all arranged?" asked Lady Elizabeth.

"All. We are ready, or will be at the proper time; but ere that time arrives we have something to say to you."

"Say on, the time is passing."

"Are you still resolved?"

"Still resolved. I have put my hand to the plough, and I am not looking back."

"If you but say the word, Elizabeth," said Aiket, "we shall abandon this enterprise—not for his sake, but for yours. We would not compromise you for all the lands of the Montgomerie."

"I say," replied Lady Elizabeth, "I have set my hand to the plough. I did not resolve without counting the cost; and nothing that has occurred since I saw you last, Aiket, has swerved me from the path on which I voluntarily entered. I am satisfied with what we have projected. It is a duty—a stern duty; but stern as it is, it is a duty that must be done."

"Well," was Aiket's answer, "we will not fail you; neither will we compromise you. You will bear yourself in this not only as becomes a daughter of the house of Cuninghame, but as the wife of a Montgomerie."

"I am not a weakling, Alexander, to fall into self-accusation. It is for you to be careful of yourselves."

"And so we will. From this thicket," said Aiket, "we can see one of the windows of the tower. Clonbeith and I will remain in hiding here until the Earl of Eglinton leaves your table. To satisfy us that he has indeed kept his word and paid you his salutation call in passing, you will—as he is about to leave the house—wave a scarf or a tablecloth from the window visible from this spot. That is all that is required of you—the rest remains with us."

"If I do my part, you will do yours?"

"We will."

"That is all I want to know, so now, ere the day break, I will get me back to the house."

Lady Elizabeth glided away as stealthily as she had come. But one straggling beam of the coming day fell on the clouds of the morning. It was only the advance courier, not the daybreak itself. Behind it were the marshalling forces of the dawn. It shot its faint ray into an aperture in the cloudland, and then the clouds rolled over the aperture, drew themselves together, and shut it out.

But not until Lady Margaret had seen it. She would rather it had not been, for it reminded her of the one sleepless eye that pierces the pall of the heaviest gloom. It quickened her footsteps, and she hurried on amid the tall trees till she reached the sanctuary of her home.

The clouds had shut out the first glimmer of the gathering day, and Lady Elizabeth closed her soul against the suggestion of the unslumbering eye beyond them. Proceeding straight to the room whose windows looked towards the copse where her friends lady concealed, she opened a press and took from it a white tablecloth. Shaking it from its folds she threw it across the back of a chair. It was all ready. A simple signal—white, spotless, stainless.

Daybreak! A charming April morn, the precursor of just such a day as was required to give *éclat* to the visit of the Earl of Eglinton to the house of Lainshaw. The sun rose, and the

forces of night scattered and sundered and disappeared as if they never had been, as if they never would be again. Higher and higher he mounted until he flooded the country in his glory, and having reached his turning point he swept round towards his setting in the west.

It was afternoon. The two watchers in the copse had their eye on the window whence was to flutter the signal. They had had a long weary wait. The morning air had chilled them, and not even the heat of the sun had been sufficient to warm the atmosphere in the shelter of the copse. Lying concealed, they had heard horsemen ride up to the door of Lainshaw, and had surmised that it was the Earl of Eglinton and his attendants. They could see nothing beyond the little circle that hemmed them in, and their long, weary waiting, did not dispose them any the more kindly to the chief of the Montgomeries.

It was indeed the Earl whom they had heard. In the prime of his early manhood, he was nevertheless matured in frame and in mind beyond his years. He had taken, and naturally, his position as head of the house of Montgomerie, and in the field and at the council board he was regarded by those who knew him as one whose future was assured.

Lord Eglinton was met at the hall door by Sir Neill Montgomerie and his wife, the Lady Elizabeth. Courteous and friendly was the greeting. The Earl bowed low to the Lady of Lainshaw, and she responded with a graceful old-fashioned curtsy, and then led him to the dining room. The company assembled to do honour to the guest was not large. It was representative. It was powerful. There was many a man who would respond to its call, and obey its behests, for the heads of the different branches of the great family of Montgomerie were there; and they were a power in the land.

There was one visitor who had come an uninvited guest, yet who occupied a seat at the social board. A friend of Sir Neill Montgomerie, Captain Stewart had ridden across from his dwelling in the House of Ochiltree; and Sir Neill, though he

would rather he had chosen another day to make his friendly call, felt he had no alternative save to welcome him. He took Lord Eglinton aside and made such explanation of Captain Stewart's presence as he thought necessary. A hardly perceptible frown darkened the handsome face of the young chief; but, at friendship that morning with all within the house of Lainshaw, the Earl accepted the explanation and made no comment.

Captain Stewart, as regarded his years, was not beyond the prime of life; but care was so deeply furrowed on his forehead that he had all the appearance, when his face was set in repose, of an old man. And a proud old man—a man who had lived in the past, battled with the past, and to whom, the past had been chequered and trial-strewn.

"Captain Stewart," said Sir Neill, addressing the stranger, and speaking with a friendly deference that was obvious, and which the stranger accepted as if it were his due, "Captain Stewart, you have not yet met the Earl of Eglinton. Come with me so that I may introduce you to his lordship."

"If Lord Eglinton has any desire to hold converse with me," returned Captain Stewart, speaking with native dignity, "I am at your service, and shall be glad to make his acquaintance. He and I have no part in common."

"You knew his father better than you can possibly have known him; for he is but young yet, and has reached his majority since your return to Ayrshire."

"Yes, I knew his father, though neither he nor Glencairn were ever favourites of mine. But come, do not let us keep the young Earl waiting."

When Captain Stewart was introduced to Lord Eglinton, the latter bowed low, and with the same deference that had characterised the demeanour of Sir Neill towards his friend from Ochiltree.

"Your lordship," said Captain Stewart, taking the initiative in conversation, "can hardly have expected to find me here; and I owe both you and Sir Neill Montgomerie an apology for

intruding upon you on so interesting an occasion. Had I known—”

“Pray do not mention it, sir,” replied the Earl, “make no apologies.”

“I have but few friends in Ayrshire or elsewhere, I fear,” returned Captain Stewart. “Friends and friendships are an uncertain commodity at best ; and, I dare say, I would not even have ventured to resume my acquaintance with our host but for the fact that he occupies a somewhat unique position in this part of the country.”

“You refer, Captain Stewart, to his wife being a daughter of the house of Glencairn ? It is an old story now, older than I : yet I confess his choice has puzzled me more than I can tell.”

“It may be a happy omen,” replied Captain Stewart, “for this family strife that has been maintained so long has unquestionably weakened the hold which both families ought to have had at the Court of King James.”

“Who knows what the result may be, sir ? But at present I am free to confess I see no indication that the strife is nearing at end.”

“That is unfortunate, Lord Eglinton. These rivalries have, as I say, done much to weaken both your influence and that of Glencairn at court ; and if you will but take advice from one who is more qualified to give it than once he was to act upon it, you will let the past be forgotten and address yourself to the future. Not the future of struggle and warfare for a local supremacy, but a struggle in the path that leads to content and happiness.”

“But were I so inclined,” replied Lord Eglinton, “I fear me Glencairn and his friends would interpret any cessation of the struggle as a weakness on my part ; and you can hardly think that that would tend to the bettering of my condition.”

“Certainly not, but apparent weakness is not always weakness in reality. You may gain more by yielding than by insisting ; and I have seen the patient waiter climb to the top of the ladder

while the impatient combatants were struggling for the bottom step on the way to advancement."

"No doubt the King will have something to say in the same direction, Captain Stewart. I am on my way to Stirling now; and if he have not the purpose in view that you seem to indicate, I shall be more than surprised."

"If that be his purpose, Lord Eglinton, yield to him, and it will be the better for you. Beware of ambition—it is the curse of the noble families of Scotland, and ever has been. There is hardly one of them that would not cast its coronet into the scale, if there were but one single hope that it might advantage itself above its fellows. I have seen more Scottish noblemen go down never to rise again, from this same vain ambition, than I could tell you in an hour's rehearsing. But I am monopolising your lordship, and Lady Elizabeth is waiting your convenience. When you return, we may resume our conversation hereanent, if you care to seek wisdom at the lips of one—"

"Than whom," Lord Eglinton interposed, "no one is more competent to dispense it. I shall certainly avail myself of your invitation—and there are some things, besides, regarding my father and his banishment from court, on which, with your permission, I should like to be informed."

"Sometimes, Lord Eglinton, ignorance of such things is happiness; but I must give place."

And so saying Captain Stewart turned to Anna Montgomerie, Lady Elizabeth's eldest daughter, and entered on a friendly conversation with her. Anna had not long known Captain Stewart. She knew nothing of his past; but she knew there was a mystery about him, and that made him interesting in the eyes of the damsel; and she chatted away to him, and he to her, with an entire absence of conventionality.

Dinner over, Lord Eglinton rose from the table to bid good-bye to the assembled guests.

"This has, indeed," said the Earl, addressing Lady Elizabeth, by whose right hand he had been sitting, "this has indeed been

a delightful meeting, Lady Elizabeth, and who knows whether, as Captain Stewart has said, it may not be a happy omen for the future."

Lady Elizabeth bowed, but said nothing.

"There are few members of your family," resumed the Earl, "with whom I should care to be at such close quarters; and there are few of them, I daresay, who would care to be at such close quarters with me."

"I am afraid," replied Lady Elizabeth, "I cannot gainsay you. The Cuninghames and the Montgomeries have ever been hostile to one another."

"Yes, Lady Elizabeth, neither of us are troubled with short memories, I am afraid, when our memories are exercised with our relations to one another."

"And yet," and Lady Elizabeth smiled as she spoke, "you have yourself seen that a Cuninghame can entertain a Montgomerie and yet remain a Cuninghame."

"She can do more than that, apparently," laughed the Earl. "She can even wed a Montgomerie and yet remain a Cuninghame."

"She can," replied the lady. The smile had died out of her face, and her voice was firm and stern withal.

Sir Neill saw danger and was about to interpose, when Captain Stewart spoke.

"You had better let the past alone, Lord Eglinton," he said pleasantly, "and live in the present and for the future. In coming hither your lordship has done well, but you must admit that Lady Elizabeth has met you half way."

"She has, indeed," replied the Earl, "and I should have let the byegone be byegone. Are my attendants ready, Sir Neill?"

"Your lordship will find them awaiting your coming at the hall door."

"Then, Lady Elizabeth, I shall say good-bye, and I thank you for your kindness."

"Good-bye, Lord Eglinton; I wish you a safe journey."

Lady Elizabeth hardly knew what she was saying, but she felt she must say something. She took the outstretched hand of the Earl, and raised her eyes to his. He looked at her searchingly, as if to read in her face the workings of her mind; and she, collecting her fortitude, returned the look without either faltering or flushing. The Earl said good bye to Sir Neill, to Captain Stewart, and to his assembled friends, and then descended the stair, his host following.

"The afternoon wears on," remarked Sir Neill, as the Earl mounted his horse.

"It does," replied Lord Eglinton, "but the evening promises to be fine, and so we can borrow an hour or two of the young moon."

"I hope this will not be your last visit to Lainshaw, Lord Eglinton."

"I hope not, Sir Neill. But you know," added the Earl laughing, "that you have yourself to thank that I have not come the sooner."

"I regret the result," replied Sir Neill, "but you can hardly expect me to regret the cause, if, as I presume, you refer to my union with a daughter of Aiket."

"Every man to his taste, Sir Neill. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Lord Eglinton. May God go with you."

The Earl waved his hand, and, attended by his servants, rode off.

CHAPTER V.

SIR NEILL MONTGOMERIE STARTLES HIS GUESTS.

NO sooner had Lady Elizabeth taken farewell of the Earl of Eglinton than she hasted from the dining-room.

As the Earl had turned to leave, Lady Elizabeth had said to herself that the leave-taking was final, the farewell eternal. And final it was too, so far as this life was concerned. But not

eternal. Its finality was but of the earth. And if Lady Elizabeth had only taken time to think, she would have remembered that there is another meeting-place than this, and that there is no alternative to keeping tryst at that meeting-place.

But she had no time to think. She had work to do ; and that had nothing to do with a future that lay beyond the coming night. She was about to wind up the scroll of the past, and she was straitened until her work should be accomplished. Let others, therefore, concern themselves with the future—her's was the present. And the present was to atone for the past.

She left the dining-room, unobserved, save that Captain Stewart noted her disappearance, and that but as an incident. It had no meaning for him, but he was trained to observation, and nothing escaped him.

The Lady of Lainshaw passed from the throng while the good-byes were being said, and hasted up-stairs. Once out of sight, she ran ; and seeking the seclusion of the chamber overlooking the copse, she shut the door. The window was open. Across the back of the chair lay the tablecloth, which she had so disposed, to await its conversion into a signal ; and lifting it up she advanced to the window, pushed it out until it unrolled itself, and then holding it firmly by the corner, shook it vigorously. Its white folds straightened out, they waved for an instant, and then they were withdrawn, and the window closed.

It was all over in less than a minute. Not a hundred seconds had elapsed from the time when Lady Elizabeth retired from the company of her guests, ere she rejoined them.

Less than a hundred seconds ! But seconds full of momentous possibilities. Ere the tablecloth had been well withdrawn, the two Cuninghames, in the quiet of the copse, were stealthily but quickly seeking an exit from their leafy surroundings. It was their time now—Lady Elizabeth had had hers. She had nothing further to do. It was hers to return to the dining hall and entertain the Montgomeries, her husband's guests—it was theirs to do what remained. So they sought their horses and rode

away, while she rejoined the company in the hall and resumed her place at the head of the table.

Sir Neill Montgomerie waited at the outer gate until the Earl and his little company of attendants had disappeared, and then he too returned to the society of his friends.

"Captain Stewart," said Anna Montgomerie addressing the stranger at the feast, "now that the Earl has gone, what do you think of him?"

"Really," replied Captain Stewart, "it is too bad to ask me what I think of the Earl of Eglinton on such a short acquaintance; besides, if I were to say anything to his detriment, you would not believe what I said."

"I'm not quite so sure of that. My father says you had great experience of men and manners before you came to live in Ayrshire, and that your opinion is worth weighing; and besides," Anna added, "you know I'm half a Cuninghame, and might believe you the more readily therefore."

"The Earl is your father's friend, Miss Montgomerie, and I must not criticise the King in the house of one of the King's friends; and then, I have seen so little of the Earl that I would rather not say anything about him."

"Just as you like, Captain Stewart, I don't want to force an opinion from you. I wonder what the King wants with him, summoning him to Stirling?"

"Of that too I am in ignorance; but there need be nothing extraordinary in the Sovereign of Scotland summoning one of Scotland's peers to his court."

"Perhaps not, sir, but it is none the less a long time since either an Earl of Glencairn or an Earl of Eglinton was so honoured. In the days of the Earl of Arran they were both kept at a distance."

"Perhaps," rejoined Captain Stewart, "the Earl of Arran had reasons of his own for not inviting them to Holyrood. You know the Montgomeries and the Cuninghames have been a law

unto themselves ; and I daresay the Earl of Arran did not care to—”

“To deal with men whom he could not control—is that not it, Captain Stewart?”

“Well, perhaps it is, who knows?” replied Captain Stewart.

“Then, in that case, either things are better since Arran was dismissed, or the King thinks he can manage his subjects better than Arran could?”

“Perhaps he can, Miss Montgomerie.”

“If all stories be true, that would not be difficult, Captain Stewart ; but here comes my gallant cousin, Gabriel Montgomerie of Hazelhead, a captain in Buccleuch’s horse, and a Montgomerie from head to foot. You had better not speak of the Cuninghames to him—that is the one point on which he and I can never agree.”

Captain Montgomerie sat down by the side of his fair cousin and joined in the conversation.

“You did not hear what I was saying as you came forward—did you Gabriel?”

“No, Anna,” returned Gabriel, “and if I had, I should not confess to it, because you know, listeners never hear any good of themselves.”

“I was saying, then—for I had better speak it out—that you were Montgomerie from head to foot, and that you had no love for the Cuninghames.”

“Nor have I, Anna, save where the blood of the Cuninghames and the Montgomeries runs in the same veins.”

“That is said for my benefit,” laughed Anna, addressing Captain Stewart, “and yet, Gabriel,” she continued, turning to her cousin, “you can hardly forget that I am my mother’s daughter?”

“Your mother, Anna, is perhaps the exception that proves the rule. She, you know, elected to become a Montgomerie rather than remain a Cuninghame.”

“She elected no such thing, Gabriel,” replied Anna. “She

is as much a Cuninghame to-day, and here, in Lainshaw, as she was the day she left Aiket."

"And yet, Anna," returned Gabriel, "she came voluntarily into the camp of the enemy."

"Yes, but with all the honours of war," retorted Anna, determined not to give way.

"No doubt," interposed Captain Stewart, "Lady Margaret acted wisely in doing as she did. The result has justified her choice; to-day she has had an opportunity of shewing the chief of the Montgomeries, that a Cuninghame can forget the past—an example I hope that will not be forgotten."

"Pardon me, sir," replied Captain Montgomerie, "the visit was at the instigation of the Earl of Eglinton."

"Then so much the better," was Captain Stewart's reply. "Lady Margaret has met his advances half way; and they ought to be a hopeful augury for the future. I confess, Captain Montgomerie, I cannot understand why this long feud should not be decently allowed to die out. It has gone on now for more than a hundred years. It has produced a crop of evils, done no good, kept the country side in unrest and disquiet, and—

"And is as far away from being at an end as ever," added Gabriel somewhat sharply.

"That must all depend sir," replied Captain Stewart with dignity, "on the good sense of those who hold the destinies of the two families in their hands."

Gabriel was about to retort angrily, when Lady Elizabeth joined the group.

"I've just been trying, Lady Elizabeth," said Captain Stewart, addressing the hostess, "to convince these young folks of the desirability of endeavouring to let their feudal sympathies have a sleep."

"And have you found the task a difficult one, Captain Stewart?" asked Lady Elizabeth.

"I can hardly say just as yet, for I have not had time, to tell the truth, to point out the advantage of the course I would urge."

"I am afraid, Captain Stewart, your advice comes late," responded Lady Elizabeth. "This is an old feud, and it is likely to be older ere it is at an end. These family quarrels have come to be part and parcel of the country life of the west."

"True, Lady Elizabeth, but to what and to whose advantage?"

"To no advantage, I admit; but they are here. We did not create them, they exist independent of us as individuals, they are a heritage, and unless your advice could be accepted by each member of the feudal families, I do not see that any good could result from the isolation of one or two individuals from the feud. My husband and I have thus isolated ourselves, but to no purpose. The feud has gone on all the same."

"So it has, Lady Elizabeth; but you have at least shown a good example, and it has not been without its fruit. Have not you, a Cuninghame, this very day entertained the chief of the house of Montgomerie?"

"Not as a Cuninghame, sir, but as the wife of a Montgomerie."

"I have seen much of this feudal warfare, Lady Elizabeth, and have been in a position to see the mainsprings of the action of rival families. I know the why and the wherefore of it all, not only in Ayrshire but in every shire in Scotland where noble struggles with noble for territorial mastery. I have been able to overlook these contendings from a position of some elevation; and I declare to you, Lady Elizabeth, on soul and conscience, that he is a benefactor to his country who tries to lay them to rest."

"That may be true, in a general way, Captain Stewart," returned Lady Elizabeth, "I do not doubt it, I grant it; but in face of the contending and the machinations of the Montgomeries—I speak as a Cuninghame, Captain Stewart—is it conceivable that the Cuninghames should give up the battle and acknowledge themselves defeated?"

"And as a Montgomerie, Lady Margaret," interposed Gabriel, "is it any the more consistent that we should submit to the

domination of the Earl of Glencairn, when we have power to resist it?"

"I am afraid that peace, in Ayrshire at least, is far from being assured," replied Captain Stewart, "when even in this house the claims of the rivals are defended."

"You have spoken the truth, sir," returned Gabriel. "The Montgomeries do not forget they have held their lands by the strength of their own right hand since the days of the Norman conquest; and, sir, they have not degenerated the while."

"Is that not all the greater reason," asked Captain Stewart, "why they should repose in the dignity of their own strength?"

"Which they have never done"—it was Lady Elizabeth who spoke. "Have they not filched from Glencairn the baillieship of Cuningham?"

"That is but a poor amend," retorted Gabriel, "for the burning of the Castle of Eglinton. That has never been avenged; and therefore, Lady Elizabeth, with all deference to you, you can hardly contend that the Montgomeries ought to take the initiative in a policy of surrender and forgetfulness of the past."

"Eglinton Castle, Gabriel, burned because Kerelaw burned before it. Castle for castle, just as there has been life for life. And as it has been, so it will be."

Captain Stewart sighed. "I fear me much," he said, "that the time is not yet ripe for compromise and for friendship. And yet," he added, "the continuance of this struggle can only be to your own undoing. Would to God that selfish ambition had never germinated in the immortal soul!"

"I can say Amen to that," cheerfully said Sir Neill Montgomerie, who had just joined the group. "But surely you are not discussing the rival claims of the Montgomeries and Cuninghames within the neutral walls of Lainshaw? Here, at least, antipathies ought to be buried, if nowhere else."

"That is just what I am trying to inculcate in a general way," replied Captain Stewart, "though without much result as yet."

Perhaps I shall succeed better bye-and-bye. I have sown the seeds—and who knows whether they may not germinate?”

“I hope they may,” remarked Sir Neill; “but hark!”

The sound of a horseman, riding at breakneck speed up the approach.

“That rider must either be mad to gallop at such a rate, or he must be the bearer of important tidings.”

A loud shout from the horseman; Sir Neill hurries from the room to the hall door. Lady Elizabeth casts a quick sharp glance at her guests. There is silence in the room. The guests are waiting to hear the tidings.

“I hope,” remarked Captain Stewart, addressing the hostess, “that nothing is amiss!”

“With whom?” asks Lady Elizabeth, her voice calm, and yet speaking for the sake of speaking, and barely conscious of what she was saying.

“With the Earl of Eglinton—something may have happened to him—some accident,” replied Captain Stewart. “But we shall soon know, for here comes Sir Neill.”

The door of the room opened, Sir Neill entered, his countenance deadly pale, his lips compressed. He cast a hasty glance around, and then, as if face to face with o’erwhelming misfortune, threw himself upon a couch.

CHAPTER VI.

THE EARL OF EGLINTON AT THE FORD OF THE ANNICK.

THE sun was westering when the Earl of Eglinton left Lainshaw. The evening was fine, the sky was blue, a crisp bracing air had superseded the calm of the morning.

All around, above and below, was token of the vernal influences. The sky was softer, its blue was deeper than in the cold winter months that were gone. The breezes, as they

traversed the uplands, and played about the valley where the Annick meanders through broad meadows and in channel deep wrought, were still cold and chill ; but the heart of the winter's bitterness had been taken out of them, with the lengthening days. The trees were tipped with the promise of the more luxuriant green that was to follow with the continued opening of the year. The birds on the branches, singing away with delectation, carolled in the fulness of their little hearts, because they heard the voice and felt the breath of the Spring, and they knew that their lilt was but the prelude to the full-toned song of the summer. The grass in the park, amid whose trees Lainshaw stood looking down on the river, was young and soft ; and nestling at the foot of the trees, the early harbingers of the gorgeous floral carpet of midsummer and early autumn upraised their tiny faces to the heaven that was above them, with their own unpretending beauty.

The Spring-time speaks to the heart. It marks an epoch. It lies between the dreary days of winter—with their snows and their rains and the cold overland winds from the far away realms of the Arctic—and the bright summer with its myriad joys. The heart feels its own gratitude and its own hopes, and unconsciously it responds to the call of the brighter suns and the lengthening days, and the putting out by the hedgerows of their shoots of green.

There was spring, too, in the heart of the young Earl. The winter was past. During the latter years of the life-time of his father, the influences at the Scottish Court had been adverse ; and he had been denied access to the inner circles of the Sovereign. He had consequently been compelled to witness from a distance the elevation of others to positions of trust and dignity, to which he felt he was as entitled as they. His son had shared in his isolation ; and, like his father, had felt it as well as experienced it. But now the Earl of Arran had been superseded, and one of the fruits of his supercession was the summons to the Earl to repair to Stirling. The summer of his life stretched out

before him ; and he saw in fancy the long rows of its pleasures and happiness.

Little dreamed he where fate was lurking. Better for him that the monarch of Scotland had not summoned him, and that he had been left to spend his life among his kinsfolk and acquaintances. Better, did I say ? Who knows ? The future is an unknown quantity.

But Lord Eglinton was not troubled with the unknown contingencies of the summons. He had welcomed it and he was on his way—and that voluntarily and cheerfully—to obey it. He rode in front of his men—there were not more than ten or twelve of them—and he pressed forward towards his destination—and his destiny.

While thus he rode, full of hope, there were other riders than he pricking their way towards the ford that bespanned the Annick. And there were no softening influences in their hearts. The spring was calling to them too ; and she would have flooded their souls with her light and her beauty if they had but let her in. But no—winter was in their soul—hard, pitiless winter—snow-enswathed—frost-bound—dark and gloomy. Stern-browed men, they rode along in silence. They were not there to speak, but to act, and they had no inclination for speech.

When Aiket and Clonbeith had seen the tablecloth waved, they had not tarried. They knew where to find their friends. These, too, were in hiding. The heads of the various branches of the house of Cuninghame were there ; and many more whose memories survive for no other reason than that they were at the Annick burn that night ere the sun set. And lest it be thought by the unbeliever that I am romancing, let me pass along their names.

There were Alexander Cuninghame of Aiket and his namesake of Clonbeith, to start with. Then there were John Cuninghame of Ross, brother to the Earl of Glencairn ; David Cuninghame of Robertland ; William Cuninghame, brother to the Laird of Aiket ; John Cuninghame, brother to the Laird of

Clonbeith; Patrick Cuninghame of Corsehill; Alexander, brother to Cuninghame of Polquhane; Robert, son of Patrick Cuninghame of Kirkland; and Abraham, natural son of the late Cuninghame of Clonbeith. These were the Cuninghames.

But they were not alone, for with them were John Reyburne of that ilk; Mungo Mure, son to the Laird of Rowallan; David Maxwell, of Kilmaldhu; David Maxwell's brother; Maxwell of Dalquhane; Andrew Arnot of Lochrig; and a number more of inferior rank, retainers of the Cuninghame family, and careless whither they rode, so as they rode against the Montgomeries.

A goodly gathering indeed, in point of numbers, was that which went forth to meet the Earl of Eglinton. But they did not go forth openly with banners flying and trumpets sounding, as men go to the battle. Swiftly they travelled; and when they reached the ford of Annick, they retired into the shelter of the adjacent woodland and left the road open. Open, save for the ambush. Open so that the Earl might ride into the valley of the shadow of death. Open so that they might hem him about, and never give him one solitary chance to make good his going.

What need to linger over the saddening story! There, in front of the Earl, flowed the river, passing onwards on its way to the sea. On either hand his prospect was shut out by the woodland, and that again was flanked by the rising ground which at this spot lends character to the scene. The country immediately adjacent gave every facility for surprise. There were numerous seclusions where the Cuninghames might have lain concealed, and whence they could have rushed upon the Earl ere he had time, or chance, to make good his going. Beyond the ford the country was hilly and open, and the young Earl, as he looked across, saw the uplands he was to traverse. The sun he expected to set on him, as he was riding through these upland solitudes. It was low down on the horizon, but not lower than his own sun on its horizon.

The scene was peaceful—it gave no token of danger—it was the very home of peace itself. There was no whispering voice

in the trees, the breezes blew free and uncommunicative, the birds sang as sweetly as if no Fate was impending, and the sun was sinking in rest. The murmuring waters of Annick raised no alarm. Their tones were heard as they flowed on, and they danced in the decadent sunbeams, and held the mystery in their still pools and depths.

God made the spot the home of peace. But as for man—! Not more surely does Annick run to the sea than does death lurk by the stones of the ford. As yet death is invisible. It is hidden by the foliage—men and horses, swords and pistols and daggers, and relentless hearts steeled to a relentless deed. But because death is hidden, it is not absent—it is hard by, the more surely that it is concealed.

The Earl rides forward. There is a movement in front of him, a noise amid the trees, the trampling of horses in the underbrush, the pushing aside of the brackens; and out from the copse ride a company of men. Cuninghame of Aiket is there, and Cuninghame of Clonbeith, and he that is brother to the Earl of Glencairn. Behind them a compact body of followers. They have no need to tell their errand or explain the reason of their presence. It is self-evident. The Earl of Eglinton knows why they are there. His fate is in front of him. Can he not forestall it?

There is only one line of escape open. It is to the rear. Quick as thought the Earl turns his horse's head to the road by which he has come—towards Lainshaw House, towards the sun that is setting. To fight his way through is out of the question. His followers are armed, but they are only a handful of men, and he dare not hope that they can contend successfully with the strong force of Cuninghames, who bar the way.

He turns. Too late. Behind him, out from the woodland shelter, ride another company of horsemen, and, like the men in front, they are armed, and ready, and desperate, and determined. Onwards he cannot go; by the road by which he has come there is no escape. So he must remain where he is and take

death as it comes. All he can do is to bear himself as a Montgomerie should—to fight to the end—to die fighting.

Alarmed, his servants gather around him. They are but a small company. Like their master, they know why and for what purpose the Cuninghames are there; and they know too, and require no man to tell them, that nothing short of a miracle can save them. And these are not the days of miracles. Who is to baulk the Cuninghames of their vengeance? Not heaven—for the sun is shining, as he sets, upon the just and the unjust alike.

There is no language wasted. The only sounds that rise to the sky are the clattering of the horsemen and the rattle of steel as the horsemen close in. And then the swords flash and the daggers gleam, and the pistols crack, and the Earl reels in his saddle. His attendants scatter. Those of them who still can flee, and who are fortunate enough to break through the ranks of the assailants, escape. They have had enough of the ford across the Annick, and the avengers of blood are on their track.

There is no escape for their chief. He at least is a doomed man. The Cuninghames strike at him again and again. He is sore wounded, but his heart is strong within him, and while life lasts he has a blow to return for a blow. But he cannot cope with such odds, and, fighting, struggling, staggering, he falls from his horse to rise no more.

Cuninghame of Clonbeith is resolved to make assurance doubly sure. He springs from his horse, draws a pistol from his belt, discharges it, and Lord Eglinton lies a corpse on the highway. The ford is still there, the trees, and the brushwood, the flowing river and the country beyond, but these are for others than the chief of the Montgomeries. The royal summons will never be obeyed. Another summons has come and set it aside.

Satisfied that they have done their work, the Cuninghames ride off. Their work is done, so far as the Earl of Eglinton is concerned. They have now their homes to set in order. For they know that the reckoning will not be long delayed.

The Earl of Eglinton lies quietly enough with his face upturned to the bending sky. There he lies in eternal sleep, the darkening canopy of the heavens above him. The breeze on the tree tops is his only requiem, and the murmuring waters of the Annick. Never again shall he dwell in his strength by the banks of the Lugton, or lead his warriors to the fray. Others shall keep tryst with King James. He has kept tryst with a greater King.

The sun sets, and there is a quietness over the landscape—nothing to disturb the silent sleeper on the highway. The stars come out with their twinkling brilliance, and the young moon reposes against the southern sky. The breeze dies away, and all is peace.

CHAPTER VII.

IN LAINSHAW WHEN THE DEED WAS DONE.

WHEN Sir Neill Montgomerie sank down upon the couch in the dining hall of Lainshaw, the guests started to their feet in confusion and wonder. They had heard the clattering of the horse-hoofs without, they knew that their host had been hastily summoned from their midst, and they felt involuntarily that a mishap was about to be revealed. But what the mishap? There were fast-speeding thoughts in the breasts of the Montgomeries, as if portent from within was pointing the way to destiny enacted without. Captain Stewart smote his hands together, then resumed his calm and the dignity of his demeanour, and darted a searching glance at Lady Elizabeth. Not less calm was she than Captain Stewart himself.

And why should she not be calm? She had been nerving herself to this all day, and every day for a week. She had seen it all enacted in her thoughts, and in her day dreams; and now that the tidings had been borne to Lainshaw and were about to

be announced, she rallied for the ordeal, and placed her senses and herself under control of the iron will within.

Sir Neill lay for a moment, his hands over his face ; but he curbed his agitation and excitement with resolute effort and rose to his feet.

"What means this, Sir Neill?" demanded Captain Stewart ;
"what is the matter?"

Full surely Captain Stewart realised what it meant. He only wanted and waited confirmation of the fear that possessed him ; but he questioned none the less with the tone of one accustomed to question and to receive replies to the point.

"Matter enough," replied Sir Neill, self-constraint and self-repression in every tone. "The Earl of Eglinton has been murdered."

Had a bolt from the blue smitten down through the ceiling, the effect could not have been more electric. There was a momentary hush of consternation, relieved here and there by a choking gasp for breath ; a series of cries, and groans, and curses smothered, and loud ; the reeling on their feet of strong-limbed and strong-hearted men who knew not what fear was, and whose joy was in the combat and the fray ; the fainting of women overborne by the tidings of the death of the young Earl who but an hour or two before had left them in the early flush of his prime, and with health and happiness, and the stretching future all within his ken ; general confusion ; and then a dozen angry, vehement, passionate demands for further information.

Who had done it? Where was the deed done? Was it the Cuninghames? Was it treachery? Had the assassin been secured? The questions rained down upon Sir Neill in crisp, sharp sequence ; and the while they were being put, angry men were grasping their swords, and their fingers were itching to hold the reins of their steeds.

But amid the questioning throng none was more conspicuous than Gabriel Montgomerie of Hazelhead, who, pressing forward impetuously, demanded loudly—

"What is that you say, sir? Tell me again, is it true that the Earl has been murdered?"

"Aye, but too true," replied Sir Neill.

"The Cuninghames! The Cuninghames! Tell me again—is it not so?" cried Gabriel.

"Yes—the Cuninghames," replied Sir Neill.

"I knew it—I thought it—curse and damn them," returned Gabriel. "How could we have let him go alone and unattended?"

"How could you have known there was danger?" said Sir Neill in reply.

"Danger! There is always danger in the Cuninghame country. To trust the Cuninghames is to trust the devil. But this is no place for me. I must be off and away to the castle of Montgomerie."

As Gabriel spoke, he turned his back upon Sir Neill, and pushing the guests aside to right and left, made straight for the door.

"Stay a moment, sir!"

The voice was that of Captain Stewart. Gabriel recognised it. There was no reason why he should obey the command; but he obeyed it, and paused, his hand upon the door.

"This is no matter to be discussed in the presence of women," continued Captain Stewart with that air of authority that admits of no gainsaying, "nor is it a matter hastily to be acted on. The whole future may depend upon the present, and you may undo yourselves by a too-impetuous rashness. Let us therefore retire to another apartment, and learn the full particulars. You do not even yet know them; and when—"

"We know enough, and more than enough," interposed Gabriel.

"You know nothing more than that the Earl has been murdered by the Cuninghames—neither where, nor by what means, nor by whom. I say that when we have heard the story, and settled the present, it will be time enough then to arrange for the future. But see, Lady Elizabeth has fainted away!"

It was true. Lady Elizabeth lay in a deep swoon upon the

floor. And no assumed nor fabricated swoon. The deed done, the tidings borne, the revenge consummated, re-action had been attendant; and she had fainted away.

"Leave the ladies to attend to the hostess," directed Captain Stewart. "She will recover the more speedily in our absence."

So protracted was the faint, that the Lady of Lainshaw was borne to a couch in another apartment, and there left in charge of her own attendant, Isabel Boyd.

And it was well for her that she was, for ere consciousness was restored, her lips spake unadvisedly, and Isabel Boyd knew more than she dared to reveal. Knew it, but kept it sacred, and died long years afterward, with the revelation sealed up in her breast.

Acting upon the instructions of Captain Stewart, Sir Neill led the way to another apartment. He was followed by Gabriel, by the other Montgomeries present, and by Captain Stewart himself.

"Tell us first and foremost, Sir Neill," said Captain Stewart, "where and how this happened."

"I know very little in detail. The horseman who brought the tidings is still in the house, and if you desire to hear the story from his lips, I shall summon him to you."

"Do so," replied Captain Stewart.

The horseman bore token of the fray, and of the hard ride for life. From a severe wound in his head the blood still continued to trickle down his face. He was already faint from loss of blood, and weak from reaction, in addition, and consequent exhaustion. His physical condition bore mute token to the ordeal through which he had passed.

When he entered the apartment Sir Neill pointed to a chair.

"You look as if you required to rest," he said; "sit there."

The servant did as directed.

"Now," continued Sir Neill, "tell us what you know."

"I know little more than this. We were riding towards the bridge that crosses the Annick at Stewarton, the Earl in front, when from the plantation skirting the road there came a company of horsemen. They barred the road to the bridge. The Earl

at once wheeled his horse, for he saw that the party was so strong and so well armed that he could not cope with them, and made to retreat, but his retreat was cut off by another party as numerous as the first. They closed in on us. Some of us managed to get away, I among others, and we made what haste we could, but, before I left, the Earl had been unhorsed and slain.

"Did you recognise the murderers?" asked Sir Neill.

"One or two of them, sir."

"Who were they?"

"I recognised Cuninghame of Aiket, and Cuninghame of Clonbeith, and the Earl of Glencairn's brother, Cuninghame of Corsehill too, and Cuninghame of Robertland."

"You saw all these?"

"I did."

"You say you remained until the Earl was slain—by whose hand did he die?"

"By the hands of those I have named; but chiefly by the hand of Clonbeith. It was he who finally despatched him."

"Then how did you escape?"

"When Clonbeith did the deed I saw an opportunity to escape, and I took it. I was pursued, but my horse outran those of my pursuers, and—and I am here."

"That is all you have to tell?"

"That is all, sir."

"Enough," Gabriel Montgomerie cried, "and more than enough. The Earl of Eglinton has been murdered, and this is no place for me."

"Why should this not be a place for you, sir?" asked Captain Stewart.

"Because the reckoning is at hand, and there is no time to stay. Besides, this is the heart of the Cuninghames' country, and it ill befits a Montgomerie to tarry so far from home."

"Not even in the house of a Montgomerie?" enquired Captain Stewart.

"Not even here," retorted Gabriel. "I know that Sir Neill

is a Montgomerie, but he has never set his hand to the struggle, and therefore I must seek those whose hands have already been put to the plough."

"The Earl was my guest, Gabriel," said Sir Neill, "and it shall never be said of me that I permitted my guest to be slain, and that unrequited. I have lived too long in the tents of peace—henceforth, I am with you."

"Revenge cannot restore the dead," Captain Stewart interposed, "nor can reprisal effect justice; and I ask of you all—not for my sake, but for your own—I beseech of you to think well of your going. Do not rashly enter upon a career of vengeance—leave vengeance to those whose duty it is to see to it, and to Him who will execute it in His own time. The monarch will not let this deed go unrequited, if you leave it to him."

"Put not your trust in princes," replied Gabriel. "The King will requite it as it suits his own convenience, if he ever requite it at all. But this is not his concern; it is ours; and Captain Stewart, I shall make bold to say, that this is a matter in which the Montgomeries can brook no interference."

"I have not interfered, save in the hope that it might be to your own advantage. It is nothing to me as an individual what the Montgomeries may do. I am not a Montgomerie any more than I am a Cuninghame. But I am regarding it as an independent spectator, whose hands shall not be defiled with blood in the cause of either Cuninghame or Montgomerie; and you may take my word for it, Sir, that the reprisal will leave you weaker than it finds you."

"It can hardly do that," retorted Gabriel, "unless we follow your advice and have none of it. The greatest weakness we can show would be to fold our hands and sit down to wait till it suits the convenience or the policy of the King to have the murderers brought to justice. But, I say again, I must hie me hence—we cannot delay."

"It would better befit you," replied Captain Stewart sharply,

"to watch by the body of your noble relative, and see it decently borne to Eglinton Castle."

Gabriel accepted the implied rebuke without retort. He had not thought of his duty to the dead; but now that he had been reminded of it, he summoned his friends, and, in company, they rode off towards the Annick stream to do their duty by the remains of the murdered Earl.

"Now that they are gone," said Captain Stewart, addressing Sir Neill, "let me give you a parting advice—for I too must be gone. I did not expect Gabriel to act otherwise than he has done. I warned him because I thought it my duty to warn him, but I foresaw all the while that he would take his own way. There will be a terrible revenge for this murder, Sir Neill—for murder it is, no matter by what name the deed may be gilded—and I foresee that there is danger to you and yours."

"There is danger to all of us, Captain Stewart—Montgomeries and Cuninghames alike."

"True, but chiefly to you and yours. Lady Elizabeth is a Cuninghame—remember that. Beyond questioning, the Montgomeries will associate her with this deed."

"Impossible, Captain Stewart!"

"I say they will associate her to a certainty with this deed; and therefore Lainshaw is in danger at both hands. When the passions are heated, angry men do not pause to question; and if you are to escape retribution, either in your own person or in that of Lady Elizabeth, you will walk charily and wisely."

"The Montgomeries cannot imagine, sir, my wife was concerned in this infernal deed?"

"I say they will—and you must reckon with it. Think for yourself—think carefully and long. Act wisely, and say little. That is all I have to say. I thought I had done with these things," continued Captain Stewart with a tone of sadness in his voice, "but apparently not. Still I shall have as little to do with what is to ensue, as possible."

"If I come to you for advice you will not withhold it?"

"Command my services as an adviser, when you require them. I shall not scruple to come to you in the hour of need. But now, Sir Neill, I must be gone—the night's dark, and it is a far cry to Ochiltree; but before I go I must take farewell of Lady Elizabeth."

"Remain where you are for a moment and I shall bring her hither."

Lady Elizabeth had recovered consciousness. She was still pale, but calm. Though her eyes gave token of exhaustion and of weeping, her glance was keen, and fell not before the scrutinizing gaze of Captain Stewart.

"This is indeed," he said, "a sad misfortune. There is no need that I should say more on that phase of the calamity; but, as I have warned your husband, so I desire to warn you. Your position as well as his is a delicate and a dangerous one; and you will require all your wisdom and all your fortitude—and that long sustained—to carry you through. The least said, the sooner mended, Lady Elizabeth, remember that."

"You cannot think, Captain Stewart," began Lady Elizabeth, "you cannot think that I—"

"I have nothing to do, Lady Elizabeth, with the quarrel," Captain Stewart said, ere Lady Elizabeth had time to finish what she had begun to say. "I have nothing to do with this quarrel, and express no opinion concerning it. But it would be wrong in me were I to conceal my belief that you will be rigidly suspected by your husband's friends. You are a Cuninghame, you know—"

"Yes, but I am also a Montgomerie."

"That is not as you phrased it earlier in the day. But that you are a Montgomerie will not save you from suspicion."

"Suspicion of what, Captain Stewart?"

"Suspicion of being privy to this deed ere it was done. The Montgomeries will not trouble themselves with anything that does not lie on the surface, and your own words this day will be

wrested to your harm. So remember, Lady Elizabeth, what I have told you—least said soonest mended. Good night.”

When Captain Stewart had taken his departure, Lady Elizabeth pondered his words.

“What can he mean,” she asked herself, “by counselling me to silence? Can he suspect? It cannot be. I have borne myself so that none can be suspicious; and he of all men, who has nothing to do with the family feud, has no right and no reason to harbour a doubt. And yet, why, otherwise, should he so advise?”

Lady Elizabeth resolved to take the advice tendered. Speak of the dead, and of the deed, she must, and would; but she would set a watch upon her mouth lest her lips should betray her.

When night settled upon Lainshaw, Lady Elizabeth, in the silence of her chamber, had time to think. She must think. She would rather have courted mental oblivion; but that was impossible. The sooner and the more resolutely she looked the deed in the face, the better. If she fought clear of it, it would haunt her; if she faced it resolutely, it would be driven into the background.

It was but one more link in the chain after all. It was a long chain. It stretched backwards over a round century, and it stretched on and away in front of her, further than she could see. It came out of the darkness; it disappeared in the darkness. That which had been was that which should be. Her's was only one link. One link! what of that? Earls had come and gone—what more they than men of common mould? It was but Fate that had made them earls, and Fate ordained their ordeal, present and to come. She knew that God had willed that the Earl of Eglinton should die. If his death by the Annick had not been predestined from all eternity, it would never have taken place—for God was powerful, all-powerful, and He could easily, if He had been so minded, have turned the thoughts and the counsels of the Cuninghames to foolishness. But He had not been so minded. He had willed the death of

the Earl. Who's, then, was the fault? Not hers. Was it a fault at all? Not if the deed was predestined. And it was predestined, else it could never have come to pass.

So the Lady of Lainshaw solaced herself. But if she had done well, why did not the Lady of Lainshaw kneel as was her wont by the bedside and thank God for the mercies of the day, and make confession of her sins? What need was there to leave the candles burning when she retired to bed? And why, when she retired to bed, did she not retire to rest? Ah, the heart knoweth its own bitterness!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MONTGOMERIES RESOLVE AND CARRY OUT A NOTABLE REVENGE.

THE Montgomeries had no time to mourn. Theirs was a sterner task than lamentation; and so, when they had laid the Earl to sleep with his forefathers—with Sir John de Montgomerie, who brought away from the field of Otterburn the banner of the Percy; with Alexander, Lord Montgomerie, to whom it had fallen, in the middle of the fifteenth century, first to stir the ire of the house of Cuninghame; with Hugh, the first of the Earls, who had fled from Eglinton Castle in 1526, when the Master of Glencairn had led his men into the rich plains beyond the banks of the Lugton, nor retraced his footsteps until he had seen the flames enwrap the strength of the Montgomeries; with John, the second Earl, who had fought with and wounded William Cuninghame of Craigens, and who had ended his days in a causeway skirmish between the Hamiltons and the Douglasses on the High Street of Edinburgh; with Hugh, the third Earl, who had fought at Langside for Mary Queen of Scots, but who had refused to approve the marriage of

Mary with Bothwell, and paid for his share in the events of his day and generation by being consigned a prisoner to the Castle of Edinburgh ; and with countesses of the family, and their sons and their daughters, who had long been at rest and in quiet—and so, when they had laid him to sleep with his kindred, they set their faces to the future and addressed themselves to their duty.

From all parts of the broad lands of the Montgomeries they came trooping in ; and when they gathered beneath the desolated roof-tree it was with no thought of aught save a swift and a terrible vengeance.

The Master of Eglinton—Robert Montgomerie, the brother of the dead Earl, constituted himself the avenger of blood. The messenger, hard riding, who had carried the tidings, had found him at home at Giffen—Giffen, once the home of the de Morvilles, a family whose name has perished in the land which once owed them allegiance, then the possession of Baliol, the competitor for the Scottish crown, and then conferred by Robert the Bruce upon the valiant Sir Hugh de Eglinton—and leaving his massive-walled keep behind him, he had hasted with all the speed he might to the spot where his strong arm and his valiant heart most were needed. He was followed by his neighbours in the same parish of Beith, Adam Montgomerie of Braidstone and Hugh Montgomerie of Bogston. The Laird of Sevenaikers, in the parish of Kilwinning, responded without a second call to the summons of the fiery cross, and he of Smithston, with his home looking down on the waters of the Garnock, accompanied him full readily. From the four-square tower of Stane in Irvine came the venerable Hugh Montgomerie, who had acted the part of tutor or guardian to the murdered chief during his minority, and who felt sad and angry at heart when he was told the vengeance of the Cuninghames. Sir Robert Montgomerie of Skelmorlie rode to the gathering in hot haste and in fury, with his men behind him, ready and eager to begin the reprisal.

And with one consent these and their fellow Montgomeries of

less note, and Gabriel Montgomerie of Hazlehead, sat them down to resolve the manner of the coming judgment.

It was Gabriel who told the story of the death by the bridge across the Annick ; and when he had finished his story there was silence. Montgomerie looked into the eyes of Montgomerie. There was darkening of brows, and clenching of fists, and deep respirations from heavy and anger-laden breasts. Dark thoughts arose in their minds, and darker deeds ; and there they pondered on, while all the time ominous silence sat upon them all.

At length, the interval of silence at an end, the Master of Eglinton turned to the venerable Hugh Montgomerie of Stane. It was he who had acted the part of a father to the murdered Earl when he had been deprived by death of his natural guardian. It was he who had borne the weight and the experience of eight long decades. It was he whose wisdom was ever at the command of the Montgomeries ; and to him, and naturally, the Master turned.

"You have heard the story, Stane," he said, addressing the old laird by the title by which he was familiarly known, "you have heard the story ?"

"Aye," replied Stane, "to my grief I have heard it. But the past is the past, and it cannot be recalled."

"Except in so far as it has to do with the present and the future," observed Sir Robert of Skelmorlie.

"There is no need at this present time," resumed Stane, "to pause to lament him who has gone. Lamentation there has been, lamentation there will be, but our duty to our murdered kinsman and chief requires something more than tears. We cannot afford to sit still and wait on events ; we must go forth to meet them ; and, old man as I am, I cannot advise you to any other course than instant vengeance."

"The advice is good, Stane," said Sir Robert of Skelmorlie. "I was afraid you might have advised otherwise."

"Sir Robert," replied Stane, "I am a Montgomerie. I have seen three Earls of Eglinton sit on the seat of the Montgomeries.

I have battled with the Cuninghames more than any man now living between the march of Renfrew and the water of Irvine. I have seen, I have felt the terrors of the fratricidal strife, and would fain have seen it at a close ; but I should be untrue to myself and untrue to the house with which I claim kinship, were I not to advise to instant and effective retribution."

"You have interpreted my feelings, Stane," said the Master of Eglinton. "I am with you, heart and soul. You have proposed the very course that I myself would have proposed, and I am glad that your sympathies are with us."

"My sympathies are with you, so am I. Old and all as I am, I shall join you in this fray. It may be the last I shall ever engage in ; and I should like, ere I am called hence, to strike one blow to avenge the slaughter of the Earl, and to have one more bold essay against the Cuninghames."

"Spoken like a Montgomerie, Stane," Sir Robert of Skelmorlie said ; "but what of the manner of the vengeance ?"

"There was once a time," replied Stane, speaking slowly and impressively, "when the Master of Glencairn and his men paid a visit that will never be forgotten to the homes of the Montgomeries. I have heard my father tell the story, and I myself have seen the traces of their handiwork. When they entered the lands of the Montgomeries—and they found our fathers unprepared to meet them—the Cuninghames began their work. It was the autumn of the year, and the harvest stood in the fields. They burned the crops, they slaughtered the cattle, they set fire to the farmsteads, they murdered the travellers on the highways, and the farmers in their homes. They spared neither age nor sex. The country behind them was blackened and charred and silent as if the destroying angel had passed over it. Smouldering ruins were their milestones, and all the way their track was marked with blood. They came so swiftly and so suddenly that there was none to prepare for their coming ; and the Earl had to leave the Castle of Eglinton and find shelter within the four square walls of the Keep of Ardrossan. The castle stood on

the very spot on which this castle, in which we are now, stands. The Cuninghames ransacked it, they pillaged it, they fired it. All the night through, the flames roared within its walls ; they lighted the way to the retreat of Glencairn, and he and his returned by another path than that by which they had come, and left the same desolation and disaster in their footprints. My friends, that raid has never to this day been avenged, and now the Cuninghames have filled the cup of their iniquity full to the brim by quenching the light of Eglinton at the Annick stream."

"Not the light of Eglinton," returned Sir Robert of Skelmorlie. "The light of Eglinton shall burn the brighter for the deed done ; and the homes of the Cuninghames shall lend themselves to the brightness of the burning."

"You have asked my advice," resumed Stane, "and I have given you it in the record of the Cuninghames' misdeeds. What they have done, so must the Montgomeries do. As they carried fire and rapine into the heart of the lands of Eglinton, so must we into the homes of Glencairn. And as they smote swiftly and without warning, so must we. There must be no time given them for intrigue or for preparation."

"Stane," spoke Gabriel Montgomerie of Hazlehead, admiringly, "you are a leader I fain would follow, were your years not out of all proportion to your indomitable resolution."

"Age only cools the courage of the braggart," replied Stane ; "it does not chill either the blood or the spirit of the true man. But you shall see that for yourselves, for I shall go with you."

"That shall you not," responded the Master of Eglinton, "if I am to be the leader. We shall need a counsellor, perhaps, and we are not going to run the risk of having him slain. So you shall stay at home, Stane."

The old man would fain have insisted on having his own way, but his fellow-Montgomeries would not have him adventure himself in the fray.

"You are wilful men," the veteran said, when at length he

bowed to their ruling, "but if I cannot go and fight with you, I can at least wish you well. Meanwhile, you know what I advise. Lose no time, lest the fox gets to earth. But what," asked Stane, "what of Lainshaw? Where is he? Has he no heart for the family honour; or has the daughter of Aiket bewitched him?"

"I trow not," replied Gabriel, "but I did not bid him hither, else he had been here."

"You should not have cast such a slight on him," said Stane. "He will join you none the more heartily that you have affected to despise his counsels."

"It was not that he was slow to revenge—for I heard him say otherwise," responded Gabriel, "but I did not think it fitting that he should be here when he is wedded to a daughter of the family against whom we are sworn to vengeance. Blood is thicker than water, Stane."

"That is true, but that concerns Sir Neill as much as it doth his wife; and therefore he should have been invited to the fray. If he refuse, or if he even interpose objections or obstacles, we shall know that he has no heart for revenge."

"But," rejoined Gabriel, "we have resolved on vengeance against the whole race of the Cuninghames. Is Lady Elizabeth not a Cuninghame?"

"Reason underlies what you say, Gabriel," said Stane. "I had not thought of that."

"Aye, and she is not a Montgomerie, either," replied Gabriel. "She told me so with her own lips, and that so plainly that I fear me she knows more about this foul transaction than she cares to tell."

"Lady Elizabeth is Sir Neill's wife, and she must not therefore be injured on mere suspicion. We shall know ere long whether her hands are clean of this infernal transaction. But until we are assured thereof, we shall leave Sir Neill alone. He will adventure himself in the cause, if he is so minded."

"I have no faith in Lady Elizabeth," Sir Robert of Skelmorlie

declared roundly, "and I verily believe that she is hand and glove with Aiket and Clonbeith in the murder of the Earl. And if I were sure of it—by the Heaven above us!—not even her alliance with the Knight of Lainshaw would shield her from my vengeance. We must see to this."

"We shall see to it, too," assented Stane, "and we shall know how to act when we have satisfied ourselves, or grounded our suspicions."

"And I shall make that my business," added Gabriel Montgomerie.

"But that need not detain us or delay us the longer," said Sir Robert of Skelmorlie. "We shall have three days for preparation, and then for the fields and the homes of the Cuninghames!"

To this they all agreed. And thus was determined the Montgomeries' revenge.

We shall see by and bye, as the curtain unfolds itself in the sequence of events, what befel the leading actors in the tragedy; but ere turning to them and to the interest which centres in the individual Cuninghames and Montgomeries who entered upon the fateful struggle, let us glance for a moment at what befel in the country side, on whose plains and by whose rivers they rode and fought.

It is not that the life of the humblest of God's creatures is not as precious to Him as those of the lords and the chiefs who sit in the seats of Government and direct the common herd to do their bidding, but that the events with which we are dealing are contingent on the few rather than on the many. It is ever thus—it has ever been thus from the beginning—it will remain thus till the close.

We generalise that which befel the country side, because it is better to generalise. Why tell in painful detail and revelation the fate that swept across North Ayrshire and afar into the confines of Renfrewshire as the Montgomeries went forth armed, and to slay, on their stern mission.

The Cuninghames' lands were broad, the Cuninghames' lands

were fair, the Cuninghames' fields were fertile. All were rejoicing in the spring. There was life and activity and happiness in the homesteads. The farm-houses sat in their little clumps of trees, or amid holms watered by crystal streams that seemed an emblem of purity as they flowed, and, in their calm stretches and placid depths, of the peace that was ere long so rudely to be dispelled. In the fields toiled the labourer, happy to gain sustenance by the sweat of his brow and the labour of his sinewy hands. The herd watched the cattle in the fields, the shepherd toiled after his fleecy flocks on the braes, and tended the snowy lambs that had begun to frisk and to gambol as they felt that they had come into the world to enjoy life.

There was nothing to indicate that the reign of peace was about to cease, or that a sterner and a more sorrowful epoch was about to dawn. The farmer thought as he ploughed down the lea that he should see the grain ripen in the mellow autumn; and the dwellers in the little homesteads under the shadow of the seats and mansions of the Cuninghames were satisfied as they looked around them that to-morrow would be as this day and more abundant.

And so they walked on, and worked on, each man in his appointed course, careless of the storm clouds that were generating around the woodlands of Eglinton. They knew not that the Montgomeries were brooding amid the gloom, forging their bolts and preparing their shafts, and that ere the moon had waxed and waned the forces of man's inhumanity should be marshalled to their undoing.

Like a squall from a cloudless sky—that same white squall that wrecks as it strikes—the Master of Eglinton and his men came upon the scene. The morning sun rose in a clear and a cloudless sky; in the evening he dipped in darkness and in blood.

Woe worth the day that fell on that hapless peasantry. They had sinned in that they were allied to the fortunes of the great house of Glencairn; and they had to pay the penalty of their

original transgression. It was not that they had connived at the death of Lord Eglinton—the echoes of that struggle had only reached them with the lapsing days—but that their tutelary deities dwelt in Kilmaurs, and in Aiket, and in Robertland, and in Corsehill, and in Clonbeith, and in the other keeps and castles which represented the strength of the Cuninghames. That was the attraction to the thunder bolt. That was what doomed them to the judgment.

Hither and thither the horsemen of Eglinton rode, and wherever they went they left the traces of their presence in rapine and desolation. Where farm-homes had smiled to the morning's light, the night-sky was reddened with their smouldering embers. The children of the wayside hamlets were left fatherless—in many cases motherless. The unsuspecting peasant by the wayside was shot down in his tracks because he sheltered himself under the shield of Glencairn—the broad shield, but not broad enough to catch the blows at unawares that were struck to the memory of the slaughtered Earl. Herds were slain as they watched by the beeves on the lea, and the shepherd on the braes. Away across the shire, northward and eastward, pricked these rough riders on their mission of vengeance, and they traversed the hilly districts of Dunlop, and held still northwards until they descended on the southern plains of Renfrew, nor returned thither until the countryside was a place of desolation and of weeping. By the burning homesteads they lighted their way in the darkness of the night, and the groans of the wounded and the dying were the music to which they marched.

You think I am romancing? Then, let the cold-blooded manuscript history of the Eglinton family speak for itself.

“For some time there was a scene of blood-shed and murder in the west that had never been known before. The friends of the family of Eglintoun flocked to the Master of Eglintoun, his brother, to assist him in revenging his brother's death, from all quarters, and in the heat of their resentment killed every

Cuninghame, without distinction, they could come by, or even so much as met with on the highways, or living peaceably in their own houses."

Such was the day of the Montgomeries' vengeance—a day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains. The land was as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness.

CHAPTER IX.

LAINSHAW IN FERMENT—THE MIDNIGHT RIDE AND THE WATCHER.

TIDINGS were brought to Sir Neill Montgomerie in his house of Lainshaw, that the Master of Eglinton and his men were abroad on their mission of vengeance. One of his servants had seen them ride by, and had elicited that they were passing with all speed towards the Castles of Corsehill and Robertland—the one lying to the north and the other to the north-east of Lainshaw.

Sir Neill was incensed when the news was told him. What had he done, he asked himself, that he should not be permitted to join in the expedition of revenge? Had not the Earl of Eglinton been his guest on the eve of his departure northwards? And had he not therefore a right to join the ranks of the Montgomeries, and ride with them to the retribution?

Not since the fatal evening had Sir Neill held intercourse with his wife concerning the matter of which both thought the most. She had avoided him, and with him the subject, as far as she could. She had gone about her household duties as if the Earl had never set out on his last journey from the House of Lainshaw; and when her husband had ventured—for it was a

venture, seeing he knew the sentiments of allegiance to the Cuninghames which Lady Elizabeth entertained—to confer with her on the situation, and its duties and prospects, she had displayed a taciturnity, and an unwillingness for conference that had held him in check, and even excited a latent, undefined suspicion in his mind. Not that she had been an actor in the tragedy—that he told himself was an impossibility—but that she was now in full sympathy with the murderers and a condoner of the deed they had done.

But now that the Montgomeries had gone on their way without him—now that he felt that an open wrong had been done him by those who should have sought his aid, and who had a right to seek it and not be denied, he resolved to fathom the mystery to its depths, and accordingly sent the messenger who had brought the tidings of the passing of the Montgomeries to ask Lady Elizabeth's presence in the library.

When Lady Elizabeth entered she found the usually placid Sir Neill in the evident condition of one who felt that a wrong had been done him, and who was ignorant why it had been done him. He was pacing the library, to relieve the agitation which would not permit him to sit down and think out the matter philosophically.

"Ah, Elizabeth?" he exclaimed as his wife entered the sanctum. "I have sent for you, because I wish to confer with you."

"Very well, Sir Neill," she replied, "here I am. There can be only one subject, I presume, on which you desire to confer at present?"

"Only one, Elizabeth, but there are so many sides to it that it might as well be six. I might have permitted matters to develop themselves further, had the law been permitted to take its course, without venturing to trouble you—for I have not forgotten the spirit you manifested when I told you that the Earl was coming to Lainshaw; but seeing that the Master of Eglinton has himself taken the revenge in hand, and only now ridden past

on his way to Corsehill at the head of his men, and that he has as completely ignored my presence, as if I were not a member of the house at all, I cannot longer delay."

"What do you say, Neill? Do you mean to say that the Master of Eglinton and his men have gone past in force to Corsehill?"

"That do I, Elizabeth—to Corsehill and then to Robertland; and they have not thought fit to bid me join them."

"They will find their errand in vain," said Lady Elizabeth, "for both Corsehill and Robertland have left the country side."

"Left the country side, Elizabeth! How do you know that?"

"I cannot shut my ears to what I hear. The whole district rings with the record of every movement in this affair; and unless I am to become a recluse altogether, and shut myself up so that I shall hear nothing, I cannot but glean the information that is abroad, and common property."

"No, that is true," replied Sir Neill, the look of suspicion which his wife's communication had called up in his face, taking its departure. "But in going, Elizabeth, they have only deferred the inevitable—not escaped it."

"That is as it may be, Sir Neill; and you cannot expect me, who am a Cuninghame, to have any sympathy in the efforts of the Master of Eglinton to accomplish their destruction."

"I thought it might have been otherwise, now that they have committed so foul and disgraceful a murder, and taken guilt to themselves in that they have fled the scene."

"I cannot turn against them if I would," returned Lady Elizabeth, the colour mantling in her face, "nor shall I make the attempt. The Earl of Eglinton has died by their hands; but the deed was neither foul nor disgraceful, Sir Neill. It was a deed that the Montgomeries would have done to the Earl of Glencairn, if they but had the opportunity; and had Glencairn been slain on the highway, you would neither have denounced Giffen nor Skelmorlie, nor the Master of Montgomerie as you do my

kinsmen ; nor fretted because you could not take part in the work of vengeance."

Sir Neill could not deny the impeachment, and he prudently said nothing.

"A deed of this kind," resumed his wife, "is justified or condemned from the standpoint at which you look at it ; and as you know very well, manslaughter and murder are two very different things. Besides, why should a Montgomerie not take retribution when it comes, as he finds it ? He has his recourse, as a Cuninghame has ; and if the Cuninghames can execute justice against Glencairn, let them do it."

"I cannot, Elizabeth, regard this matter as you do, and regret as deeply as I am capable of regretting, that you should condone a deed wicked in itself, and certain to involve the country-side in the most lamentable of consequences. I cannot deviate from my duty any the less to the memory of my murdered kinsman, because of the schism in my own household."

"Nor can I, Sir Neill. Think you that I can be oblivious to the long record of wrong done to the house of Glencairn by that of Eglinton, or that the memory of these many years can be blurred or defaced by the slaughter of your kinsman ? This is not a solitary act, Sir Neill : it is only one link in a long, and apparently an endless chain. But why," she continued, noting with intuitive insight that Sir Neill chafed because of the slight put upon him by the Master of Eglinton and his other friends, "but why have the Montgomeries left you out of their reckoning ? Is it that they cannot trust you ? Or is it that they think you have no heart for the work of reprisal ?"

"They wrong me if they think either the one or the other ; for, as I am Knight of Lainshaw, I would have ridden with them with hearty good will."

"Aye, if they had given you the chance ! But they have not given you the chance. They think you are cold or callous of the family honour."

"No, they cannot hold any such opinion," replied Sir Neill angrily. "I have never given them any cause to think so."

"Have you not, Sir Neill?" asked Lady Elizabeth, driving home her shaft, "Have you not married a daughter of the house of Glencairn, and does not the Cuninghame blood mingle with that of the Montgomeries in the veins of your children?"

"True, Elizabeth, but I am a Montgomerie."

"Aye, and no one had more right to lead the Montgomeries than you in this revenge. The Earl was your guest."

"He was."

"He left your house to meet his fate by the Annick burn."

"He did."

"And yet the Montgomeries plot and plan their revenge, and leave you out in the cold!"

"By heaven, Elizabeth, but it is true!"

"And why, Neill? Is it not because they feel they cannot count on you—that they do not trust you, and that they are careless how they slight you?"

Sir Neill paced the floor angrily, wounded pride evident in every footstep.

"Or there is another explanation of their action?" resumed Lady Elizabeth, rising to her feet.

"And that is?"

"That is, that they regard your wife as privy to this deed—this murder as you call it; to the slaughter of your chief by the Annick."

"Impossible, Elizabeth, they cannot believe that," retorted the Earl angrily, "that were a suspicion too gross to be entertained."

"And yet it may be the explanation why they have not summoned you to join with them in their reprisal."

"No, no, Elizabeth. I say again it cannot be. But I must know their motives none the less. I cannot let this pass without questioning, or suffer in silence such a wrong done to my honour."

"As for me, Sir Neill, I shall have no part or lot in the business. It is enough for me that I feel that I am the object of suspicion. It is enough for me that this suspicion has been extended to my husband, and that his friends think that regard for his family honour and the traditions of his house have been extinguished because of his alliance with me. And it shall never be said of me that by word or deed, by thought or intent, I turned my hand against the family of Cuninghame or aided in the sacrifice of the humblest member of it upon the altar of the Montgomeries. You may act as you think fit—so shall I; but I hope you will wisely consider whether you should proffer assistance to men who have not trusted you from the beginning."

"I had a right to be trusted, Elizabeth," replied Sir Neill, "and I am conscious of my rectitude, and that I have done nothing to engender suspicion. I must do the duty that lies to my hand, but I must also discover why others have not done their duty by me."

The interview closed, Lady Elizabeth went her way to her household vocations, and Sir Neill was left to brood over the wrong done him.

There was a visitor that night to the house of Lainshaw. Gabriel Montgomerie of Hazlehead had ridden all the day long with the Master of Eglinton on the mission of vengeance. It had been a stern day's work—a day long to be remembered. Houses had blazed and their occupants had been left stark and stiff on the threshold of their ruins. Flying peasants had been shot down in their tracks, and fell destruction had been rife on many a fair field and in many a hapless hamlet. The avengers were weary with their work, not weary of it. They had still further to go, and more work to do; but they and their horses were alike fatigued, and now they were resting from their labours in the Castle of Robertland.

Its occupants had fled; and when the Montgomeries had entered its courtyard they had found no sign of life. The stalls in the stables were empty; the cattle had been driven to the

hills; not a dog raised its voice to question the coming of the intruders. The door of the Castle stood wide open, but no Cuninghames came forth to give the Montgomeries greeting. All silent stood up the walls of the castle in the grey of the evening, and then against the background of the stars; and the rooms that were wont to be tenanted were deserted by their occupants.

The Montgomeries took possession. The horses were stabled, the fires were lit, and from topmost turret to basement roamed the men of Eglinton. Better fared they in Robertland than they had done at Corsehill. The gate of Corsehill had been closed as they approached it, and its walls had been lined with angry men; and the avengers, unable to carry the Castle by assault, had perforce to leave it behind them, and press forward to fresh fields of conquest and carnage, and to extend their fury where its execution might the less afford delay.

And now that the evening had come and darkness had settled on the landscape, Gabriel Montgomerie bethought himself of Lady Elizabeth, and of Lainshaw; and leaving his comrades behind him in the Place of Robertland he remounted his weary steed and took his way thither.

"We have had a hard day's riding and a hard day's work, Sir Neill," said Gabriel, as he entered, "and I have come across from Robertland to tell you how we have fared."

"You have something to tell me ere you tell me that, Gabriel," was Sir Neill's reply, "why was I not with you?"

The question was sharply put, and it took Gabriel aback. He had not reckoned on being so directly brought to book. So he hesitated ere he stammered out a repetition of the question.

"Why were you not with us?"

"Yes, that is what concerns me first and foremost. Have I forfeited my position as a member of the family of Montgomerie that I should be left out of the reckoning?"

"By no means, Sir Neill; but," replied Gabriel, "if the truth must be told, we thought your alliance with Lady Elizabeth

would have prevented you joining us on our errand of vengeance against her kinsmen."

"And by what right did you think so? Have I ever shown myself careless of the family honour? And who, more than I, had a claim to avenge the murder of him who was my guest two short hours ere he was sent to his last account?"

"None, I admit, Sir Neill; but you know better than I that Lady Elizabeth openly boasts her alliance with the Cuninghame family; and on that account we resolved to act without you. Besides, you are in the enemy's country here, and, if you do not take part with us, you will not be called to suffer from reprisal."

"These are no sufficient explanations, Gabriel. I claim my right to membership of the family of Eglinton, and equally I claim my right to share in its honours, and to partake in its perils."

"Well, Sir Neill, it is not too late yet to join us. Our mission is not yet half accomplished."

"Join you I would—join you I will, gladly; but I must none the less demand an explanation at the hands of the Master of Eglinton."

"You had better spare yourself recrimination, Sir Neill. The Master of Eglinton can give you no further explanation than that you have already received."

"I must perforce accept it if none other be forthcoming, but I shall remember the affront none the less. And now, Gabriel, tell me your day's doings. How have you fared?"

"Well for ourselves, badly for our foes. But I shall tell you in detail."

Ere Gabriel had time to begin his narration, Lady Elizabeth entered. She was pale but composed. Rumours of the day had reached her in the quiet of Lainshaw, and she suffered in secret, as she might well suffer, because of the misfortunes that had befallen her kith and kin. Greetings over,

"I have just asked Gabriel," said Sir Neill, addressing his wife, "to give me the record of the day's revenge. You will judge for yourself whether you will care to hear it or no."

"I am not afraid to hear it," replied Lady Elizabeth, quietly. "Better bad news first hand than have it filtered through a hundred different channels. The news must be told, and I shall hear it now."

Gabriel looked at the pale, resolute countenance of the Lady of Lainshaw. Her lips were compressed, and she was under evident strong self-restraint. But there was no sign of flinching from evil tidings, and Gabriel told his story. What that story was, is already told. It was a tale of horror to the quiet listener, steeled to the listening, but never once during all the telling did she flinch. She felt unutterably as Gabriel recounted the slaughter of the peasantry and of humbler members of the Cuninghame family, whom she had known well in the days ere she was the lady of Lainshaw; but never a word spoken now gave index to the feeling with which she was wrought. All she said—nor said it until Gabriel was finished—was:

"You have had your day."

And they had their day, as well she knew.

"We start to-morrow ere daylight from Robertland," continued Gabriel, not heeding the comment, or daring to retort.

"In what direction?" asked Sir Neill.

"That depends on the Master of Eglinton," replied Gabriel, "but I have reason to believe that the route will be to Auchenharvie and Clonbeith. We shall not be expected there, so far to the westward of the direct road to Renfrewshire. But as I say, that is for the Master to direct. Shall you accompany us, Sir Neill?"

"I shall ride across to Robertland with you in the morning and see the Master of Eglinton," Sir Neill replied, "and after I have seen him I shall arrange the course of action I shall pursue."

"I am afraid you shall have to ride alone, for I return to Robertland to-night."

"Just as you please," was the response of Sir Neill, who made no effort to induce Captain Montgomerie to change his plans.

The night was dark when Gabriel took his way in the direction

of the Castle of Robertland. Sir Neill and Lady Elizabeth bade him good-night. The former showed unmistakably that he felt the affront he had received. Lady Elizabeth was still outwardly calm and unmoved.

Gabriel had no sooner reached a secluded spot at a safe distance from the Castle, than he picketed his horse and returned to Lainshaw on foot. It was suspicion that had induced him to pay Lainshaw a visit, and it was still suspicion that induced him to return. He secreted himself by the side of the way leading northwards, and waited. What could he expect?

The night wore on. The young moon set. The stars shone on the sleeping country just as if no raiding, revenging Montgomeries had passed across it. The peace was theirs; they could not impart it to mankind; they could only twinkle in the vault, all unconscious of the scenes on which they shone.

The lights went out in Lainshaw. Sounds in the dwelling there were none. Everything indicated that the inmates sought repose. Why, then, did Gabriel Montgomerie watch on?

Was that a light he saw pass along the corridor of one of the upper storeys? Was it the faint glimmer of a candle that shot out into the darkness and then disappeared? Was there one restless inmate of Lainshaw to whom repose was denied, or whose motives induced activity when rest should have been the portion?

Gabriel watched the light. He saw it disappear at one window to reappear at another, and he waited to see what would eventuate.

The reserve that had sustained Lady Elizabeth Montgomerie she flung aside when she returned to her chamber. Throwing herself upon her bed, she gave way to a passionate flood of weeping; and what made it the harder to bear was that she had to weep in silence. There was no comforter who could minister consolations; and she had perforce to give vent to her tears in solitude.

But the tears brought relief—the relief stimulated to action.

What could she do, Lady Elizabeth asked herself, to save her friends in Auchenharvie and in Clonbeith? The night was dark, the road was dreary, and seven long miles of open country lay between Lainshaw and Auchenharvie, the nearer of the two castles.

But what were the long miles and the darkness, and the dreariness, to the lives of Lady Elizabeth's friends?

It was now eleven o'clock. Could she not ride across the country and warn the laird of Auchenharvie? She could return by two o'clock of the morning; and who would be a whit the wiser?

The Lady of Lainshaw acted on her own inspiration. Robbing herself, she passed quietly along the passages, down stairs, and out into the night. The stars were there, and the felt quiet of the upland and the field. She cast one glance overhead and another into the darkness that lay before her, and then she took her way to the stables where stood horses well accustomed to the lea and the muirland, and to the rude lanes and farm roads; and selecting Sir Neill's own favourite charger, she led him quietly from the stall, saddled him, and bridled him, and led him out.

The stables were sufficiently removed from the castle to minimise any risk in the detection of her movements. If the sound of the horse hoofs reached the inmates at all, it would come as an echo of the night, and it would die away so suddenly in the distance, and on the soft turf, beneath the tread of the charger, that it would cease like a dream. But heard or not heard, cease or not cease, the risk must be run.

Taking every precaution, Lady Elizabeth led the horse out into the open and then, springing into the saddle, she addressed herself to her task. Away she went into the night with its open fields and its green lanes and its rough roads, and its belts of trees, all placid and still under the gloom; and giving her horse the rein, she took her way to Auchenharvie.

It was a solitary ride, and as sad as it was solitary. Here and there, there were still glowing patches on the night sky, and the

rider knew that these were reflections cast by the smouldering ruins of homes that had been happy, and homesteads that had represented the worldly all of those who had dwelt in them. Sound there was none, save a stray voice of the night from the shelter of the copse or the thicket, but from across the country there came to the lady's ears the silent echoes of the strife and the groans of the wounded and the saddened.

Where was the glory now of the deed by the Annick? Where was the atonement for the waving of the table-cloth from the window of Lainshaw? Lady Elizabeth saw through the darkness and the mirk midnight, and there passed, even as the tops of the trees against the background of the sky, a vision of the raid. She saw lights, she heard voices, that she had never expected to see and to hear. Faintly borne on the night wind to her conscience came the groans of the dying. She saw men lie stark and stiff by their cottage doors, women weeping for their husbands, children for their fathers. She saw the cottages go up in smoke and in flame, and Montgomeries surrounding them, every man with his weapon unsheathed. She heard mingled prayers and shrieks and cries for vengeance.

Vengeance upon whom? Upon the Montgomeries. But who had let loose the dogs of havoc and the hordes to slay? But for her would the sky have grown red? Would the Montgomeries have swept across the country like a band of evil angels? Had she not set the torch to the homesteads? Had the peasantry not fallen because of her misdeed? Who then was responsible?

Let these things stand over for the future. Lady Elizabeth had a mission now; and though her soul was darker than the night, she must hurry forward to its fulfilment. If she could not undo, she could warn. And so she pressed on until she reached the castle of Auchenharvie.

The warder held the horse when he had given Lady Elizabeth admission. A few short moments were all she required wherein to give her warning, and to arouse the slumbering household to

action ; and without loss of time she remounted and pursued her way back to the castle of Lainshaw.

None within its walls would know of her absence, and she returned to her chamber as she had left it, quietly and unobserved. Only, from his seclusion in the greenwood, Gabriel Montgomerie had observed her going, and guessed the purport of the midnight ride.

CHAPTER X.

SIR NEILL MONTGOMERIE RECEIVES HIS EXPLANATION.

WHEN Gabriel Montgomerie had satisfied himself of the direction taken by Lady Elizabeth, and divined the purpose of her journey, he returned to Robertland. Neither Sir Robert of Skelmorlie nor the Master of Eglinton had retired to rest ; they were too busy conferring of the morrow to court sleep. And Gabriel found them engaged in converse with one another.

"I thought as much," observed Gabriel, as he joined their company. "I told you I had my doubts concerning Lady Elizabeth, and I have had them resolved. I have been to Lainshaw."

"Why did you go thither, sir?" demanded the Master of Eglinton. "You should not have left Robertland without my consent."

"I ask pardon if I have done wrong ; but you may remember that I pledged myself to find out Lady Elizabeth's connection with the Earl's death ; and if I have not yet made the connection clear, I have strengthened my suspicions."

"You should not, I say," returned the Master of Eglinton, "have gone beyond the gates of this house without my consent ;

but if you have accomplished anything by your visit to Lainshaw, I shall not remember the offence against you."

"I have learned enough to lead me to believe that your raid upon Auchenharvie to-morrow will be in vain. Auchenharvie has been warned of your coming."

"By whom?"

"By Lady Elizabeth Montgomerie."

"How do you know?"

Gabriel detailed all that had passed.

"You are certain it was Lady Elizabeth you saw ride away?" asked the Master, when the story had been told.

"Certain, and if you want proof of it you will find it in the morning. The birds will have forsaken the dovecots of Auchenharvie."

"Your tidings only confirm my suspicions," said Sir Robert of Skelmorlie, who was the more hot-headed of the twain, and who jumped without difficulty to his conclusions. "I have never trusted that woman from the first day I set my eyes on her, and now I am confident that she knows more about the murder of the Earl than she cares to tell."

"I fear you are correct in your surmise," the Master said; "and I am convinced that were Sir Neill assured that she was perfectly innocent, he would not have delayed taking the initiative in the work of reprisal."

"Sir Neill suspect her!" exclaimed Gabriel. "Sir Neill would as soon suspect himself. Sir Neill is as certain she is guiltless as he is of his own innocence in the matter; and he would as soon recognise in himself the murderer as he would believe that his wife could have had the most distant association with the tragedy."

"There is such a thing," retorted Skelmorlie, "as protesting too much. If Sir Neill says that his wife is innocent, it is because there is a doubt in his own mind, and he is trying to allay it."

"That I do not believe," replied Gabriel. "To do Sir Neill justice, I am certain he has not the shadow of a doubt in the

matter. But that has nothing to do with it. We harbour a doubt, a very serious doubt ; and it will require very strong proof to the contrary to convince me otherwise."

"And me," assented the Master of Eglinton. "If all stories be true, the Lady of Lainshaw has not abated, by one jot or tittle, her family loves and hatreds. Barring her own husband, there is not a Montgomerie on whose behalf she would think it worth while to interpose ; and she has only forgiven Sir Neill because he is her husband."

"In that case," said Sir Robert, "I am inclined to agree with you. We must have none of Sir Neill's aid. Why should we ask him to go with us when his wife has gone before and warned those whom we are most desirous to find ? And why should we permit him to share in our counsels when, without a doubt, his wife would discover all that we contemplate and forestall us if it was in her power ?"

"It is impossible that we can associate him with us in this enterprise," said the Master of Eglinton ; "and should he join us in the morning, we must tell him plainly and firmly that we shall have none of his aid."

"I agree with you," asserted Gabriel ; "but remember, none the less, that Sir Neill will be mightily incensed when he is told any such thing."

"That as it may be," replied the Master of Eglinton, "we cannot endanger our cause for no other reason than that we are solicitous as regards Sir Neill Montgomerie's feelings ; and as this may not be an affair of days but of months—mayhap of years—the sooner we go our own way and allow him to go his the better."

To this they all agreed ; and it was arranged that should Sir Neill Montgomerie join them ere they had set out for Auchenhavie the following morning, the Master of Eglinton and Sir Robert of Skelmorlie should so inform him ; and having so resolved, they retired to rest.

Their slumber—what of that ? Did the memory of the bye-

gone day's series of tragedies disturb their repose? Was sleep driven from their eyes by the midnight echoes of the last dying wails and groans of those whom they had so suddenly ushered to their last account? Did the memories of Robertland not possess them? Did not the shades of the Cuninghames who had dwelt in it haunt them through the midnight watches? No, none of these. Gentle sleep came to them. Not even the thought of the morrow whose sun was to light up a fresh succession of slaughters, cast its shadow before it, and across the pillows on which the Montgomeries laid their weary heads. Exhausted nature claimed repose, and sleep came down as sweetly and sealed their eyelids as gently as it had upon the dweller in the tents of peace or the weary peasant between Robertland and the march of Renfrew who had lain down to rest for the last time, save for that long, dreamless slumber into which he was to enter ere the gloaming should fall again on the country side.

And with the dawn they were afoot. Men of action, of enterprise, they lay not abed till the sun had risen clear of the horizon; but with the first blush of the orient they sprang armed and ready from their couches, and prepared for the execution of their own stern decrees.

They were on the eve of setting out when a solitary rider came to the hall door. It was Sir Neill Montgomerie. He too had been afoot early. He had borrowed an hour from the darkness of the early morning; and, as became a Montgomerie of that dark morning, was prepared to give account of himself.

"You are early in the saddle, Sir Neill?" observed the Master of Eglinton, as Sir Neill reined up at the door.

"But not too early, Giffen," replied Sir Neill, "to find you astir, and ready for the way."

"We had need to be early on the path, for we have a long day in front of us, and much work is to be done ere it closes."

"I have come to join you," replied Sir Neill, "but ere we set

forth I desire to confer with you—not in presence of this company, but alone. Our interview need not detain us long.”

“The shorter the better, for we cannot afford to lose valuable time,” rejoined the Master of Eglinton. “Come this way, Sir Neill, one of my men will attend to your horse—and, Skelmorlie,” continued the Master, addressing Sir Robert, “you will join Sir Neill and me in consultation.”

Sir Neill jumped from his horse, and the three Montgomeries entered the house of Robertland.

“You little thought, I daresay,” Sir Robert remarked, “that we three should ever meet in Robertland.”

“I never thought of such a thing at all, Sir Robert,” responded Sir Neill, “and if such an idea had ever crossed my mind I should have dismissed the very suggestion as an absurdity. But I did not come here to discuss such topics. I have something more important to say.”

“Time is precious, then,” returned the Master; “so if you have anything to say ere we start we shall have it now.”

“Why was I not invited to join the family council at Eglinton Castle ere this enterprise that you are engaged in was determined? and why, when you passed within a mile of Lainshaw yesterday, did you not bid me accompany you?”

The Master marked the tone in which the questions were put—it was dignified and resentful; and he replied in the same spirit.

“Your questions, Sir Neill, are not hard to answer, though I would rather you had not addressed them to me. You might have found an answer had you addressed yourself to your own conscience, and to your own knowledge and experience; but as you question directly, so directly shall I answer.”

“I have asked nothing else from you than a direct answer,” replied Sir Neill. “My conscience does not reproach me for aught in this connection, and therefore I cannot question it; and I know of nothing, sir, that interferes between me and the duty I owe to the house of Montgomerie. No member of this family

had a greater concern in this enterprise than I ; and it is because of that I ask explanation."

"If you oblige me to speak plainly," returned the Master of Eglinton, "I will do so. You cannot be unmindful that you are wedded to a daughter of Aiket, and that Lady Elizabeth makes no secret of her sympathies and her family loves and hatreds?"

"I thought that would be your explanation," angrily replied Sir Neill ; "but it is a miserable subterfuge—a begging of the question."

"Subterfuge or no subterfuge," said the Master, "what I say is true, and you cannot gainsay it. Think you that we had no cause for acting as we have done?"

"It is quite true," Sir Neill replied, "that I am wedded to a daughter of Aiket. But I did not wed away my birthright when I espoused Lady Elizabeth. I did not wed away my whole family associations and ties. I did not wed myself into the house of Glencairn, and I am no more a member of that house to-day, than if I had espoused another wife."

"That may be true," the Master responded, "I hope it is—I doubt it not if you so assure us ; but it still remains that Lady Elizabeth is an open adherent of the house of Glencairn ; and she has so expressed herself within these last few days, both before the murder of the Earl and since the murder. You cannot gainsay that, Sir Neill?"

"That is a matter that concerns me, and me alone—not you," observed Sir Neill.

"Save that a house divided against itself cannot stand, Sir Neill."

"But Lainshaw is not a house divided against itself. I act as I see fit, and I repeat that no man on all the broad lands of Montgomerie had an equal right with me to be consulted in this emergency. Your explanation is, therefore, aside of the purpose."

"I have already said, Sir Neill," replied the Master, "that I had rather you had not asked an explanation at my hands ; but you have asked it in the exercise of your right. And I tell you

again, that it is notorious that Lady Elizabeth is in active sympathy with the Cuninghames.'

"You do not dare to insinuate, Sir," retorted Sir Neill angrily, "that Lady Elizabeth was in any way art and part in the murder of the Earl of Eglinton?"

"I have not said so, Sir Neill," replied the Master, "but that she is in active sympathy with the Cuninghames, is a fact that can neither be disputed nor gainsaid. And if you choose to ride with us this morning as far as Auchenharvie and Clonbeith, you will find proof of what I say."

"I do not understand your meaning, sir," answered Sir Neill. "Pray explain yourself a little more clearly."

"You will find," resumed the Master, "that the Cuninghames in these houses have been warned of our coming, and that they have made good their escape."

"And at whose instance have they been so warned?"

"At the instance of Lady Elizabeth Montgomerie of Lainshaw," replied the Master of Eglinton emphatically.

"You will require to prove what you say, Sir," Sir Neill broke out indignantly.

"I can prove it here, and now, Sir Neill. Auchenharvie was warned last night by a messenger from Lainshaw."

"Impossible. It cannot be. No messenger left Lainshaw last night on any such errand."

"You labour under a misapprehension, Sir Neill. And permit me to say that your misapprehension supplies a reason, and a sufficient one, why we should not have sought your aid. A messenger did go from Lainshaw, as I say. Would you like to know who that messenger was?"

"I would, for I cannot believe it."

"The messenger was seen, the messenger was watched, the direction in which the messenger travelled was noted; and it is beyond a doubt that Auchenharvie was warned and passed the word to Clonbeith."

"But the messenger, the messenger!" said Sir Neill anxiously, "who was it?"

"Lady Elizabeth Montgomerie," replied the Master of Eglinton. "She, and none other than she."

The intelligence fell on Sir Neill with the force of conviction. It crushed him so that he forebore to ask the offered proof.

"You have forced the explanation yourself," resumed the Master after a pause. "You have compelled me to say why we have not allied you with us in this enterprise; and I ask you now, if you care to reply, to say whether we have not had justification sufficient?"

But Sir Neill did not care to pursue the subject further. That the Master spoke the truth he divined instantly; and that from a simple incident of the morning. Ere he had set forth on his journey to Robertland, Lady Elizabeth, who had been present at his departure, had asked him what horse he intended to ride, and when he had replied specifically, she had urged him to leave the animal at home and take another. And it had occurred to him—nor could he account for it at the time—as he was on his way across the country, that the horse was not so fresh as it should have been. He comprehended the reason now.

That was the simple incident that carried home conviction to the mind of Sir Neill Montgomerie, and drove him from the presence of the Master of Eglinton and Sir Robert of Skelmorlie without further attempt at remonstrance.

No sooner had Sir Neill remounted and ridden slowly away towards Lainshaw than the Master of Eglinton mustered his men and took his way to Auchenhavrie. Gabriel's prophecy was fulfilled; the birds had flown. As in the case of Robertland, the castle showed no sign and gave no sound of life. The men of Eglinton had no means at their disposal to effect immediate entrance. The outer gates were closed and securely fastened, and as the Montgomeries had still much work to do, they left the grey walls of the keep behind and proceeded on their

mission of vengeance. Again their passions were let loose upon the hapless peasantry. Again the day was darkened by fell retaliation upon house and upon person. Again the Israelitish battle policy was put in force with relentless and inexorable rigour; and though Clonbeith, as well as Auchenhavrie, stood secure at close of day, all that made them valuable, apart from their own inherent strength, and the wealth treasured up within their walls, and the broad acres surrounding them which could only be defaced and desecrated by carnage and destruction, was destroyed. It was a day of red ruin to those upon whom no ruin should have been rained.

Apart altogether from the time that would have been spent in reducing the strongholds of the Cuninghames, there was a substantial reason in the minds of the Montgomeries why these vantages should not be destroyed. They had not entered on a policy of swift and sudden vengeance merely. Sufficient for the day was the revenge thereof. But beyond the day stretched the future with its possibilities, and it was on one of these that the Montgomeries were depending. They concluded, and not without reason, that the king would espouse their cause; and they foresaw in that espousal the possibility of the forfeiture of the lands of the Cuninghames, and cherished the hope of entering into ultimate possession. They had no intent, therefore, to lay in smouldering ruins castles that might one day be their own; and so, while they directed their vengeance upon the owners of the strengths of Glencairn, and upon those who dwelt under their protection, they had determined to leave the fortresses alone that they might not destroy their own prospective inheritance.

And when the Montgomeries had ridden into Renfrew and laid waste the country adjacent to the borders of Ayrshire, they returned to Eglinton, to exchange the raid and general pillage and massacre for a war of personal vengeance upon those more immediately concerned in the slaughter of the Earl. The fate of Lady Elizabeth was reserved for further consideration and

further development. They suspected—they suspected strongly—but they must have their suspicions confirmed.

CHAPTER XI.

DOMESTIC STORMCLOUDS BREAKING OVER LAINSHAW.

SIR NEILL MONTGOMERIE rode home sadly, slowly. His mind was a whirl of contending emotions. His pride was hurt. His sense of honour was offended. His domestic happiness was in the scale. He was angry at his fellow-men. Worse than all, he had lost faith in his wife.

He could have forgiven the Montgomeries: he could even have ridden side by side with them on their mission of vengeance right into the heart of the enemy's country, and kindled with his own hands the homes of those who had slain the chief of the Montgomeries. But now he had sorrowfully to admit that the Montgomeries had wisely acted in not soliciting his aid. His heart told him that it was from no fault of his own that his friends had thus set him at naught; and, sad though it made him to accept the conclusion, he had no other recourse than to throw the weight of his dishonour on the author of his misery. And that was one to whom his honour should have been as precious as his life.

He dismounted at Lainshaw, silently, moodily, at war with himself, at enmity with the world. His brow was overcast; he looked downwards, which was not his wont; and when he bid his attendant take his horse to its stall, he had not the courage to look him straight in the face. The attendant noted the change, and obeyed in silence and in wonder; and Sir Neill entered his home, melancholy, anger, and wounded pride striving all the while within him for the mastery, and the unhappy combination all but conquering him.

Repairing to the library, he paced the floor in an effort to compose his mind and recover his temper. He knew he had to face the situation and the future, and he tried to do it calmly. He struggled to discover the path of duty, half-conscious all the while that his judgment was beclouded, his mind warped, by dominating passion.

It was a melancholy forenoon that he passed in his own battle of the soul; but manfully he wrestled, and after a few hours he succeeded in composing himself sufficiently to warrant him in thinking that he might send for Lady Elizabeth without saying anything he might live to regret.

When Lady Elizabeth joined her husband in the library, she needed no telling that there was a storm brewing. She read its signs in the marked look of Sir Neill, in his enforced calmness, in the self-restraint which he had imposed on himself; and she nerved herself as best she could to resist the opening of the flood gates. Sir Neill Montgomerie thought he was so outwardly calm that even his wife would be deceived by the appearance, but she saw with intuition that needed no explanation, that the calm was the dangerous calm that comes before the storm.

"Elizabeth," said Sir Neill, "I have sent for you because I have something to say to you—something of importance."

Lady Elizabeth indicated that she was there to hear what he had to say, but instead of forthwith proceeding to relieve his mind of its burden, Sir Neill walked the floor for a succession of minutes ere he could frame the manner of his further discourse.

"I have been to Robertland," at length he said, "and have held converse with the Master of Eglinton and Sir Robert Montgomerie of Skelmorlie. You know the opening purport of my visit?"

Lady Elizabeth bowed her affirmative.

"They explained to me," Sir Neill resumed, "the wherefore of their declining my aid in their undertaking, and I think you should know all that passed; the story will not take long in the telling."

"I can well conceive," replied Lady Elizabeth, "the purport of their reply, but do not let that prevent you telling it. We have never been accustomed to hold anything secret, one from the other."

"No, that is true, Elizabeth. We never were accustomed to distrust one another, or to withhold mutual confidence; nor did I ever expect that a time should come that such mutual confidence should be shaken."

Lady Elizabeth flushed. "I confess," she replied. "I confess, Sir Neill, that I am anxious to learn the details of your interview, and I hope that you will not fail to justify the insinuation you have but now thought proper to convey."

"You shall have the insinuation justified all in good time, Elizabeth. You know I rode across to Robertland this morning—you were afoot and witnessed my departure—in order that I might demand of the Master of Eglinton an explanation. I need not repeat why I thought fit to ask such an explanation—you know that also. The Master told me plainly, and in so many words, that I was not asked to their counsels, nor invited to join them, because I was allied by marriage with the house of Glencairn."

"I surmised as much, Sir Neill. They struck you through your wife. It is as I expected."

"It was in one sense as I, too, anticipated. You say I was struck through my wife, and so I was, as you shall hear. I protested as an honest man and as a Montgomerie against the slight that had been cast on me, and insisted on the due recognition of my position."

"With what result?"

"Before I tell you with what result, Elizabeth, there is something else I have to communicate. You know the horse on which I rode to Robertland this morning?"

The Lady of Lainshaw darted a lightning glance at her husband. He was watching her intently, and saw the look that came to her face.

"Yes," she replied as calmly as she could. "Yes, I know the horse."

"Well," returned Sir Neill, speaking slowly and deliberately, "he was not so fresh as he ought to have been."

Lady Elizabeth bit her lips, and clenched her hands; but said nothing. The colour went and came in her face, and then faded away to return no more until the close of the interview.

"Yes," repeated Sir Neill, "the horse was tired—just as if he had been out during the night, and had been hard ridden across the country."

Lady Elizabeth gave no audible token of the thoughts that rushed to her mind; she but set her face the harder, and refused to be moved to compromising utterance.

"Perhaps," continued Sir Neill, standing in front of his wife and facing her, his eyes fixed upon hers. "Perhaps it would have been better that I should have ridden another horse. You advised me to take another, and I ought perhaps, I say, to have taken your advice. But be that as it may, Lady Elizabeth—you have asked me to what effect the Master replied to my remonstrance and protestation. He told me that there was an enemy to the Montgomeries in this camp—I could not deny it—and that when the country was asleep and darkness overspread it, a messenger from Lainshaw had ridden to Auchenharvie and warned its inmates of coming danger."

Lady Elizabeth was breathing heavily. Every word was telling. It required a strong effort to resist breaking forth in passion and in unguarded language; but the moment for eruption had not yet come. Lady Elizabeth retained her self-control.

Not so Sir Neill. His voice had risen. His face was the face of a man in passion. His utterance quivered, and he clenched his fists as he spoke.

"Yes," he said fiercely, "Auchenharvie was warned, Lady Elizabeth—warned, by Heaven!—and warned too from Lainshaw, whence the destruction should have come."

The Lady of Lainshaw steeled herself to one more effort at self-repression.

"Warned did you say, Sir Neill—by whom?"

"By you."

The words were shouted. The last shred of control Sir Neill had discarded. His face was livid, and he raised his hand as if he would have smitten his wife where she sat.

"Yes, by you, Lady Elizabeth," he repeated, "by you. Can you deny it? Deny it if you can, and that quickly. You were seen, Lady Elizabeth, you were watched; you rode across the country at the hour of midnight; you rode that very horse which I saddled to bear me to my disgrace—you rode to Auchenhavie—you know you did. Can you deny it, I say? If you can, speak now."

Like her husband, Lady Elizabeth abandoned her self-control and sprang to her feet. She faced Sir Neill and looked straight into his eyes. He did not turn from the look.

"Can I deny it?" she cried, speaking in tones which rang out in the ears of her husband, "Can I deny it? Have I denied it? Have I sought to deny it? I have but done my duty, Sir Neill. I have but sought to save those who are my kith and kin; and I would do it again, Sir Neill, and that to-night, to accomplish the same end."

"Beware, Lady Elizabeth, beware what you say. Remember I am a Montgomerie, and no power on earth can swerve me by one hairs-breadth from my duty to the house of Eglinton. I am bound by ties that I cannot break."

"A Montgomerie!" returned the Lady of Lainshaw, "I know you are a Montgomerie—to my grief I know it. Had you not been a Montgomerie, the Earl of Eglinton would have been alive to this day. It was you who brought him into the jaws of death. And remember, Sir Neill, that I am a Cuninghame—what you owe to your family I owe to mine; and again I say, I would ride the darkest night that ever was, to save the humblest of the

Cuninghames from the vengeance of the proudest of the Montgomeries."

"Have you no thought for your husband, Lady Elizabeth?" fiercely demanded Sir Neill. "Am I to be brought to shame and disgrace before the world by my own wife?"

"It is not I that have brought you to shame and disgrace," replied Lady Elizabeth in the same tones. "I have but done my duty, and I would do it again. What do the Cuninghames owe to the Montgomeries? Nothing but vengeance. You have left us a legacy of wrong—you have cozened us, cheated us, thwarted us, by every means in your power; and now, forsooth, because the Earl of Eglinton has justice done upon him, you expect the heavens to fall and crush us out of existence!"

"Cease, Lady Elizabeth, cease, I say. The slaying of the Earl was a brutal, a cruel murder, and God will requite it at the hands of those who wrought its consummation. May those who accomplished it be cursed in their house and in their homes, in their peace and in their joy; and may the same death which they meted out to him be their portion!"

"Forbear your maledictions," retorted Lady Elizabeth, "lest they light upon your own head. I say the deed was justifiable in the eye of heaven and earth; and I tell you again that had the Earl of Eglinton never entered the house of Lainshaw, he had never been slain. It was you who brought about his death."

"For God's sake, Elizabeth," returned Sir Neill, the dawn of his wife's direct association with the deed breaking upon him, "for God's sake, explain what you say."

"I say," the Lady of Lainshaw defiantly replied, "I say that he never would have been slain had he not passed within the portals of this dwelling."

"Elizabeth," Sir Neill demanded, "you cannot mean that you bore a part in this damnable transaction?"

"It was no damnable transaction, Sir Neill. It was a deed that was justified by every precedent of the house of Montgomerie. I laid no hand upon the Earl; but I would not have

stretched out my finger to save his life. He might have been saved had I but willed it."

Sir Neill staggered on the floor. A cold perspiration broke over him. He felt now fully that his wife had been privy to the deed ; and the knowledge appalled him. Lady Elizabeth saw the effect her words had produced, and, throwing reserve aside in the angry passion which led her to glory in her action, she plied her shafts.

"What you call a murder, I call a judgment, Sir Neill, and I would have been untrue to myself and him whose daughter I am, and to the house of Glencairn, had I acted otherwise than I have done. From the moment when you bid me prepare to receive the chief of the Montgomeries in Lainshaw, the path of my duty was stretched out plain before me. I looked at it, I did not hesitate to walk in it, I pursued it undeviatingly ; and now that the Earl is dead, I am still following the path of duty in sheltering those who, but for me, would have permitted him to ride to Stirling in peace. I do not reproach myself ; my conscience does not reproach me ; I have not kept anything secret from you ; I am in full knowledge of the consequences of what I have done, and I am prepared to accept these, whatever they may be. You are a Montgomerie, as I am a Cuninghame. I have done my duty—I call God to witness I would do it again—and it remains for you to do yours."

Sir Neil gazed at his wife in mute astonishment and horror. He dared not speak—he could not speak. The situation was beyond his immediate grasp. He longed to be alone that he might wrestle in secret with the emotions begotten by the revelations of his spouse.

Lady Elizabeth comprehended what was in his mind, and without further word she left the room.

For hours Sir Neill was alone with himself, with his thoughts, with the revelation. If the deed was murder, and his wife the occasion of it, was she not a murderess ? That was the dominant, the over-powering, the over-mastering thought of all others.

In presence of it, her sympathy with the Cuninghames faded away into nothing. In presence of it, his treatment by the members of his own family was but a drop in the bucket. In presence of it, the midnight ride and the warning at the hall door of Auchenhavrie grew dim and indistinct and impalpable.

A murderess! And had it come to this? Was this the consummation of five and twenty years of happiness? Had the escutcheon of the great house of Montgomerie been befouled because he had wedded a daughter of Glencairn? Had not a great wall of partition been erected that could never be broken down? Could the love of a quarter of a century survive the revelation of which he had been the recipient?

But there was something that more immediately demanded an answer. What was to be done now? What was his present duty? The Master of Eglinton was full well aware that his wife was in concord and in sympathy with the enemies of Eglinton—but he did not know what Sir Neill had just now heard. That was a secret—his own secret—his secret unshared save by his wife. Should he avail himself of the knowledge which he possessed and deliver up his wife to the justice which her misdoing had righteously provoked? Or should he maintain the secret as his own? The line of duty—that was what he tried to descry in the darkness—duty on the one hand to himself, on the other to the House of Eglinton. Should he be swayed by the love of the quarter century that had gone, or animated by the revelation which that morning had been hurled at his head? Was the deed connived at by Lady Elizabeth, but one solitary act of a lifetime that could never be repeated? Was it a tragedy let in upon the domestic drama? Or, was it the opening scene in a chapter that was to stretch on to the close of life?

Sir Neill struggled hard to see the light. But see it he could not. All was darkness, impalpable, unrelieved gloom. He could not descry one faint streak of light in the density of the pall.

And then he remembered that Captain Stewart had bidden

him come to him for counsel when he needed it. That was a ray, of a kind. It was not a ray upon the darkness of the situation; but it was a glimmer across the path of perplexity. Captain Stewart—who better than he could advise? Such things had been familiar to him. He had watched the main-springs of action from a point of vantage which few had ever reached, to which fewer still could ever attain. And now that he had borne his experience into the quiet of the glades of Ochiltree, why should Sir Neill not borrow from that experience?

Could Captain Stewart be trusted? Trusted! Perish the suspicion involved in the question. This was but child's play to what he had seen! And relegating the momentary hesitation to the limbo of those things never to be recalled, Sir Neill Montgomerie, ere the afternoon had begun to wane, anew mounted his horse and took his way to Ochiltree.

But the stormy interview between Sir Neill and his wife had not escaped attention. The attendant whom the former had despatched to call Lady Elizabeth to the library had observed the unaccustomed demeanour of his master; and when the door of the library was closed he had returned and had played the part of eavesdropper.

CHAPTER XII.

LADY ELIZABETH TURNS HER BACK ON LAINSHAW.

IN the quiet of Ochiltree Captain Stewart had time and to spare for meditation. Nor was the material whereon to meditate wanting. The world had been his portion, and he had made the most of it while his star was yet in the ascendant. The star had sunk into the cloudland of quiet country life; and now its beams were confined to itself. Whatever satisfaction there was in its shining, was its, and its alone.

A most unsatisfactory way for any star to shine. And yet, in the case of Captain Stewart, he often wondered whether the quiet and the solitudes of the glades and the melody of the sympathetic streams which he had known long ago, and which bore simple home memories upon their breasts, were not better by far than the glare of the Scottish Court, and the rivalries and revelries of the Scottish courtiers.

The contrast between the one life and the other was ever before him. The country once had known him, and had resounded with his praises and with his own glorification. A second time it had known him, and it had resounded with the noise of his fall. It had seen him climb the giddy ascent of the statesman's ladder, stand awhile on the pinnacle amid the plaudits of the throng, and then descend again until he vanished from the nation's gaze, as if he never had been. His brief hour had been—of greatness, of adulation, honour; now the hours were all his own, and he had time to think and to muse and to moralize on the transitory and evanescent character of that which is of the earth earthy.

Sir Neill Montgomerie found Captain Stewart at home, enjoying a stroll in the foreshadowed gloom of the coming night. The shadows were lengthening, darkening; and over the landscape they were stealing with the quiet of the inevitable.

They were suggestive enough to Captain Stewart. But then, they were soothing as well, and he loved the calm influences of the gloaming.

"I thought you would come," he said to Sir Neill Montgomerie, after he had given him welcome and led him into the house. "I foresaw trouble for you."

"You foresaw rightly then," replied Sir Neill, "for I have not had the trouble to seek. It has sought me, and come unbidden."

"Trouble generally does come unbidden, Sir Neill. God knows we have no need to invite it, though, sooth to speak, we invite it not seldom when we think we are bidding it stand at a distance. It is never far removed from the man to whom

ambition is a loadstone, and it intercepts him in his pathway when he least expects it."

"'Tis so with me," returned Sir Neill, "though I cannot plead guilty to ambition. I have ever been content with the quiet of the country side, and the happiness of home. But trouble has sought me in my retreat, and now that it has come to Lainshaw, it has come with no measured or halting footsteps. And it has come from the quarter whence I might least have anticipated it."

"That is very likely, and quite natural, Sir Neill," said Captain Stewart. "Man is born to trouble ; and just as often as not it springs up in his path when he has no reason and no right to expect it, and strikes him the harder because of the suddenness of its coming, and the unexpected quarter whence it springs. That has been my experience, at least. But you have come to consult me, Sir Neill, not to hear me moralising on trouble, like a Presbyterian minister ; and so, if you have any need for counsel, I am at your service."

"I have said, Captain Stewart, that the trouble has assailed me where I never surmised trouble could have existed."

"And I say again, Sir Neill, that I am not surprised to hear what you say. It is through your wife that you have been so hardly hit ?"

"Yes, it is through my wife. And more than that, I could have stood up against being wounded through Lady Elizabeth, but what makes the sore so grievous is that I have been wounded by her as well as through her."

"I feared as much," replied Captain Stewart, gravely. "While you were entertaining the Earl of Eglinton, I was attracted towards Lady Elizabeth by something which at first I could not comprehend ; but the more carefully and closely I watched, the more I saw how she was wrought by the presence of the Earl. I knew that she was a Cuninghame, but until that day I had no idea that she was still more of a Cuninghame than a Montgomerie. You say you have been wounded by your wife as well as through her. Do you mean to say that Lady Elizabeth——?"

Captain Stewart did not complete the question. He left Sir Neill to fill up what remained in such fashion as best suited him.

Sir Neill did not waste time or language. He had made up his mind to tell Captain Stewart all, and accordingly he replied.

"Lady Elizabeth was privy to the deed before it was consummated. Worse still, it was she who instigated it."

A dark frown settled on the face of Sir Neill as he communicated the incriminating information, but it found no response on the countenance of Captain Stewart. He received the communication calmly, without change of feature, contenting himself with stroking his long beard as he meditated on the gravity of the secret of which he had been made the custodian.

"Again I say," he said, after a brief pause, "that I feared as much. When the news was brought of the Earl's murder—for murder it was, though it may be glossed over and transformed into a deed of retribution—I watched Lady Elizabeth closely. When the Earl left Lainshaw she left the dining hall as soon as she had taken farewell of him; and I gather now from what you say, that she left then to communicate to her friends that he was on the eve of departure. But how do you know this? Who told you?"

"My wife—she told me herself. At midnight of last night she was seen by Captain Montgomerie of Hazelhead riding towards Auchenhavrie to warn the dwellers that the Montgomeries were to execute vengeance upon them to-day. The Master of Eglinton told me so: and when I taxed Lady Elizabeth with it, she not only defended what she had done, she not only defended the murder, but she told me that but for the Earl having come to Lainshaw, he had never been slain."

"What you say, Sir Neill, is very serious. I feel for you in the terrible position in which you are placed. You are in the dark as to the future—as to your duty—is that not so?"

"That is so, and I have come hither to ask advice from you. You invited me to avail myself of your services; and though I little thought at the time I should so soon feel the need of

seeking your aid, I have come hither because I am in a strait, and because I know not what to do, or to what hand I am to turn."

"What can you do, Sir Neill? What does your sense of duty dictate?"

"What can I do?" replied Sir Neill. "I can do nothing. I cannot see the way of duty. I am distracted so that I cannot think; and what must be done, must be done quickly, and therefore, I place myself in your hands. You will think for me—Captain Stewart—you will advise me what I am to do. I shall take your advice whatever it be."

"Even if I should advise you to turn your back upon the wife of your bosom, and hand her over to the avengers of the Earl of Eglinton?"

"I am in a strait, I say," replied Sir Neill, avoiding the giving of any direct answer to the question, "and I cannot see the path of duty."

"To whom, Sir Neill Montgomerie, is your first duty? Is it towards yourself, or your wife, or the house of Eglinton?"

"You ask a hard question. My first duty is towards myself and my own household; and yet it is hardly less towards the house of Eglinton."

"But it is less?"

"Yes it is less, save where my duty toward myself and towards the house of Eglinton is one and indivisible."

"If such a combination be possible. I take it that your first duty is towards yourself and your wife and family—towards the house of Lainshaw, in other words. Your wife has been privy to this deed—she has even instigated it. But let us place ourselves in the position of Lady Elizabeth; let us suppose ourselves animated by her motives, possessed with her sympathies, and as strongly partisan as she is. Whatever we may regard this deed, in whatever light we regard it, she regards it as a just recompense upon the Montgomeries for the wrong they have done to Glencairn, and the whole race of the Cuninghames. You believe that?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, then, regarding the deed as justifiable, she thinks she has done no wrong?"

"On the contrary, Sir, she thinks she has done God service."

"Many an atrocity has been perpetrated in His name, and atrocities they have been for all that. But some allowance must be made for motive; and that brings us back to your duty to Lainshaw. You must remember the motive, and then you must consider whether in the circumstances you would be justified in acting as your own wife's executioner."

"God forbid!" ejaculated Sir Neill fervently.

"Amen!" responded Captain Stewart. "To that course I could not advise you. But what you know, the Montgomeries outside of Lainshaw may suspect; in any case, they know quite enough to warrant them in regarding Lady Elizabeth as an active sympathiser with Glencairn!"

"Aye, enough and to spare."

"Well then, you may depend on it, they will wreak their vengeance on her if the opportunity should offer. They will not have themselves balked of their revenge, without retribution on her who has come between them and vengeance."

"I know enough of them, Captain Stewart, to know that they will not forget what she has done."

"So do I. I know them of old—these Montgomeries. Providence has blessed them with memories and with tenacity, and, therefore, my advice to you is to persuade Lady Elizabeth to leave the country for a while. When the bruit has ceased, the Earl of Glencairn will succeed in obtaining a remission of punishment for all concerned in this deed, and the king will exercise his influence in having peace restored, and the feud brought to a termination. Meanwhile, it will be in the highest degree dangerous to have Lady Elizabeth at Lainshaw. You cannot secrete her there. Your servants are sympathisers with your family, not with hers, and they would acquaint the Master of Eglinton with her whereabouts in spite of all you could do to

prevent it. You cannot seal their lips, and a secret to some is only valuable in so far as it may be communicated."

"But surely the Master of Eglinton—"

"Trust nothing to the Master of Eglinton, Sir. You have offended him by your alliance with Lady Elizabeth; and he will not scruple to pay you back if he can. And, therefore, bid her that she depart, and lose no time; for the Montgomerie blood is hot just now, and the Montgomerie arm is ready to smite."

"I have asked your advice, Captain Stewart, and I shall not fail to take it," said Sir Neill emphatically—the more so that the advice tallied with his own feelings and inclinations.

"You will find the advice is sound, Sir Neill. Your duty, as I have said, is to stand by your wife at all hazards. She has done wrong; she has wronged you; but we cannot afford in this world to mete out his deserts to every offender, else none of us would escape the judgment. But now that we have finished our consultation, you will join me at dinner ere you set out on your return—for I presume you will not stay over night?"

"No, sir, time may be precious, and if I am to act on your advice I must begin at once."

"And see, Sir Neill, that you keep your own counsel. Be silent. If you require to act, act; if you require to speak, speak; but be brief, and give no reasons to any one for aught you do. You will of course, at the same time, exercise your discretion how far you may tell the members of your family what has happened."

"I must tell Anna, at least, Captain Stewart. None but she in the meantime. Anna is her mother's pet bairn, and can be trusted. No power on earth could extract a syllable from her that she was unwilling voluntarily to communicate."

Ere leaving for Lainshaw, Sir Neill fell a-talking of that which was uppermost in his mind.

"Supposing," he said to Captain Stewart, "supposing she refuses to leave the country, what am I to do then?"

"If she refuse," replied Captain Stewart, "get her into hiding

as best you can. You will know one at least, surely, whom you can trust in such an issue, and who would secrete Lady Elizabeth either for your sake or her own !”

“Could I venture so far as to presume to send her to Ochiltree ?”

Captain Stewart shook his head.

“No,” he replied. “Venture nothing in this direction. I have had my days of venture, but they are done. Were it to transpire that Lady Elizabeth was concealed here, there are not wanting those who would trace the whole tragedy to me ; and so, for my own safety, I must say you nay.”

Sir Neill had perforce to rest satisfied with the reply. It was kindly, yet firmly spoken ; and there was something in the manner of it that repelled further attempt in the direction indicated in the question.

The day had been a long and an exciting one for Sir Neill Montgomerie ; and as he rode homewards through the moonlight he felt thankful that days such as that must come to an end. His mind was still sore perplexed, but in the unburdening of it to Captain Stewart, he had sensibly relieved it of the terrible pressure to which it had been subjected. The interview with the Master of Eglinton in the morning, the revelation made to him by his wife, and the counsel which he had sought and obtained at Ochiltree, had all tended to make the hours memorable ; and if Sir Neill Montgomerie was sensibly thankful at all for anything, it was that night had come down to enshroud himself and his cares and anxieties in its sympathetic covering.

But long as the day had been, it was not yet done. Sir Neill had yet another interview awaiting him, and one that afforded him no pleasure in the prospect. Animated by the stern necessity of communicating to Lady Elizabeth the counsel given him by Captain Stewart, he felt none the less the severity of the trial to which fate was subjecting him. In the heat of the morning’s passion he could have turned his wife to the door and let vengeance take its course upon her ; but now, whether from

the dying away and the expending upon himself of the morning's ire, or from having had the satisfaction of sharing his troubles with one who had been himself troubled, or from the influences of the alleviating night, without passion in the folds of its darkness though it beclouded the cruelty and the sins of mankind, or from the dawn of a suspicion that the Montgomeries had more than wrought out a commensurate reprisal—from whatever cause, or combination of causes—Sir Neill came back to the love which he cherished for his spouse. Probably that was the ruling power, and that alone. For five and twenty years no jarring note of dissonance had been struck upon the harp-strings of Lainshaw. Clear, and resonant, and tuneful were the sounds of the quarter of a century ; and though the climax had been discord and the snapping of the chords, he remembered rather the long, sweet harmony that had ceased, and for ever.

Sir Neill's was a temperament that had to expend its passions upon itself, and these were now all but exhausted ; and he looked ahead with a great sorrow in his heart that fate had been unkind to him, and that it should compel him to urge his wife to a step that must necessarily, in the taking of it, involve a long separation, the one from the other. For, deeply as he loved the Lady Elizabeth, she had deeply wronged him ; and it was not his intention to share with her the banishment to which he was to advise her to consign herself. He had his duties to do, and these necessitated his continuance at Lainshaw ; and he went home with a clearer leading, though with a sadder heart, than that he had possessed when he set forth in the afternoon on his way to Ochiltree.

And the Lady of Lainshaw—how had she spent the day? To her, as to her husband, it was a day much to be remembered. A dark day, cloud-capped, with not one ray of sunlight in her heart all the while that the sun was circling in the sky. Without, there was life and joy, the gladness of nature in the new birth of the spring ; within, the horizon sat low, and the darkness was only relieved by the flashing of the lightning, leaving the

gloom more intense, more profound than before. She had no one to whom to turn to seek solace. Solace she could not seek without revealing why she needed it, and that was an impossible barrier on the pathway to consolation.

So all the day she remained in her chamber, the prey of riven thoughts and lurid fears, and yet the heaviest trial of all was the love that she had for her husband. She had instigated to slaughter—that she could condone. She had played the hostess to the man whom she had consigned to the death—she could condone that too. But to have forfeited the love of Sir Neill Montgomerie—that was a price too heavy to have paid, and which a great ransom could never redeem.

It was nearly midnight when Sir Neill returned and went straight to the chamber of his wife. He found her wrapt in doleful reverie, as she had been while all the waning hours of the day had winged their dolorous flight. She roused at the sound of his approaching footsteps, half-steeled herself to resume the defiance of the morning, tried in vain to recall the triumphant satisfaction of having obliterated a series of great wrongs by the consummation of a greater—and then, womanlike, having strained the powers of her endurance till she broke down under their strain, she burst into tears and welcomed her husband with weeping.

A proceeding so entirely foreign to anything that Sir Neill Montgomerie anticipated, that he sat down, and, remembering only his love for his spouse, joined her in copious demonstration of mutual grief.

But the flowing tears could not flow for ever. The melting mood passed. Lady Elizabeth dried her tears and waited to hear what her lord had to say; and Sir Neill, not knowing very well what to say, could only exclaim:

“Elizabeth!”

And exclaim it in a tone that Lady Elizabeth quite understood to be a gauge or index to the continuance of the long affection which he had felt for her. And she responded, “Neill!” in

accents so similar, that Sir Neill Montgomerie all but collapsed a second time.

What they might have done had the clock not struck the hour of midnight there is no need to conjecture ; but the striking of the hour that marks the boundary between the days recalled them to the world and away from the demonstration of their mutual affection, and told them to be up and doing for the present was running into the future, and there was no discharge in the warfare of their lives. And inasmuch as Sir Neill had something to say, it was he who began.

"There is no need, Elizabeth, to say anything about the past. If God can forgive us, so ought we also to forgive one another ; and therefore I want to leave the past alone just now and look to the future. But before I say any more, let me say this, that henceforward and for ever the past—that past—you know what past I mean—shall be a sealed book. We can never agree upon it."

Lady Elizabeth sat listening. She nodded her head in acquiescence.

"I have tried to understand your motives and your feelings," Sir Neill continued, "and though I cannot understand or comprehend them to the full, I can quite appreciate the fact that you and I regard the mur—what has happened, I should say—from different standpoints. I am free to admit that."

"But oh, why, Neill?" Lady Elizabeth asked, and from the depths of her earnestness, "why did you ever bring the Earl to Lainshaw? Why was I chosen to be the instrument—I who have lived here in peace, and undisturbed these many years, while the strife went on without—I who had heard up till then but the echoes of the struggle?"

"I say, Elizabeth, let the past alone. You cannot recall it—not even God can recall the past ; so let it alone, I say, and look to the present and what our duty is now."

"So I will, Neill, but let me speak once more of the past—to you, thereafter, I shall speak of it no more. You cannot under-

stand how I was driven ; how fate impelled me to do as I did. I seemed to get on the crest of a great wave of judgment ; it hurried me forward ; I could not resist its impulse ; I could not stay its impetus ; and I felt all the while as if predestination had hold of me. Everything is ordained of heaven. The Earl's death was thus ordained, and from all eternity it was I who was chosen to set the wheels in motion. Who am I that I should try to arrest the car of heaven's justice ? Who am I that I should attempt to stay the progress of predestination ? I was helpless. I could not battle down the feelings I had. I knew that I was wronging you—I grieved for it in silence—I would have died rather than wrong you had I been a free agent. But the way before me was the way of duty. I never doubted it, I do not doubt it now. I have done no more than I was justified in doing ; and I wished to tell you this, that you might not think me guilty of a heartless crime, without either cause or motive. I was helpless as a child in the arms of destiny."

Lady Elizabeth looked towards her husband as if she expected reply, but he resolutely drew tight the curtain strings that shut out the past, and addressed himself to the future.

"Since I saw you this morning, Elizabeth," he said, "I have seen Captain Stewart, and have informed him of all."

"Of everything, Neill ?"

"Of everything. I have kept nothing back from him, and I have had the benefit of his wise counsel. He anticipates that you will fall within the scope of the Master of Eglinton's vengeance, and that your personal safety demands that you should for a while leave the country and remain abroad until there is peace between the families of Eglinton and Glencairn."

Silence followed. Surely this was a horrid dream that the Lady Elizabeth was experiencing ! Surely it was some weird voice of the night that was urging her to flee from Lainshaw ! It could not be her husband who was thus telling her that she must say goodbye to him and to their children, and go out into the wilderness—and all was wilderness to her that lay beyond

Lainshaw—to a land where the solace of her husband's love and the music of her children's voices would be unknown and unheard!

She would awake from the dream, and with the awaking the weird voice of the night would die into the eternity of the silence whence it had come.

But no—it was no voice from the dreamland. For Sir Neill resumed—

“That is Captain Stewart's opinion, Elizabeth—and it is mine. God knows, my dear, that I would I could say otherwise, but I feel, I know, that you are in danger here, and that the Montgomeries will not spare you.”

A second time Sir Neill paused, waiting his wife's reply. But she only looked at him with blanched face and lustrous penetrating eyes. The full import of what her husband was saying was dawning upon her.

“That you must be kept out of the way of the Master of Eglinton there can be no denying. That you can be concealed in Lainshaw is an impossibility. The sympathies of the servants are all with the Montgomeries, not with the Cuninghames, and they would regard themselves as doing nothing more than their duty in betraying you into the hands of the Master.”

“Can you mean, Neill,” asked Lady Elizabeth, faintly, “that I am to go away and leave you?”

“For a time, Elizabeth.” It was hard to say it, but Sir Neill said it firmly.

“And my children?”

“It may not be for long, Elizabeth; and it is to save your own life, and put a short parting in the room of an everlasting farewell, that I thus urge you.”

“Then, Neill, I cannot do it.”

Lady Elizabeth spoke quietly, but with a ring of unmistakable determination in her voice; and Sir Neill, growing the more earnest, implored his wife by her duty to him and to their family, to yield to the dire necessity which alone could save her. There

is no need to tell all that passed during these quiet hours of the night, when all was silent and still, save these voices in the chamber. No necessity exists for repeating the passionate appeals which Sir Neill made to his wife, or withdrawing the curtain, so that the reader may gaze upon a scene which those who took part in it for ever thereafter regarded as sacred and inviolable.

But while Lady Elizabeth was inexorable on one point, she yielded on another. Leave the country she would not, but she consented to tarry awhile, and that in secret, in the house of a dependant of the Cuninghame family, mid-way between Lainshaw and Corsehill.

And thither she repaired the following night. It was all the sadder leave-taking, because of the manner of it. No good-bye kiss was given, no farewell embrace. In silence Lady Elizabeth had to face the inevitable. When the children had retired to rest, she went to the rooms in which they slept, and looked at each silent sleeper. Oh, the agony of the mute farewells, the unspoken prayers, the entrancing gaze upon features that the Lady of Lainshaw might never see again in the flesh, the turning away from the bedsides, perhaps for ever! What of the worth of Lady Elizabeth's predestination now? The Earl of Eglinton was dead—gone to his last account. But this was worse than death—the severance of a mother from her children, the mother unable to say good-bye, and going out into the darkness of the night, and the greater darkness of an unknown future.

To Anna, her mother consigned the care of the household. Anna alone knew what was in store. The other children slept all unconscious of the waking, and knew not that when the morning came they would look in vain for the mother that was to soothe them with the manifestation of her love. Anna bore the ordeal with a fortitude that inspired her mother with trust in the custodian of her household cares, and that assured the Lady Elizabeth that Sir Neill would neither lack counsel nor support in the days of his trial.

And when Lainshaw was quiet, the lights gone out, the feet of the dwellers silent in the passages, Lady Elizabeth passed swiftly along the dark corridors, and down the stairs. She knew the whole surroundings so well ! On the walls of the passages were the pictures of Montgomeries who were dead and gone. Their silent, expressive faces—were they not looking down upon her in the darkness as she passed from their ken ? Were they not frowning on the woman who had plotted the death of the chief of the line to which they had sworn allegiance ! She felt the memories that were all about her, the hopes and the loves. These she was in part taking with her.

She was going hence, but not to forget all these grey walls, these rooms and corridors, these paintings, these oaken ceilings—they were going with her. So, too, were her loves, and her hopes. She was not going out into the cold to leave love behind her—and that she was going out, perhaps never to return, intensified the warmth of the affection which she bore to her children. Hope ! she could not leave that behind. It was all she had to sustain her in the wilderness.

And out into the night she went. The moon was overhead. The trees and the fields and the hedgerows were all asleep, with the soft light of an ever-present memory upon them. The house of Lainshaw was asleep against the stars, its heavy walls, almost pathetic in their chastened beauty, and reposeful as peace and moonlight could make them.

Sir Neill was waiting to accompany her, and they took their solitary way to the place of Lady Elizabeth's atonement. For it was to be hers, while years rolled by, to see Lainshaw only at intervals, and when the night had fallen. It was to be hers to revisit the scenes which held her heart in constant thrall, by stealth, and secure from the ken of the curious. Not till the expiatory sacrifice of self-bondage had been offered up : not till time had softened hard and bitter memories : not till the fear of the Montgomeries had ceased to fall upon the country side : not till present vindictiveness had well nigh wrought itself out, was

Lady Elizabeth to be restored to the home she had left, or see the sun shine on the grey walls and the pleasant lands of Lainshaw.

Here and for ever, so far as I am concerned, Lady Elizabeth passes away. I might have kept her a shadowy creation in the background : but inasmuch as this is a history of the times that were : inasmuch as I can find nothing in the data of the times to warrant me in reproducing her at intervals to minister to the gratification of the lover of the mysterious : and inasmuch as the weird she had to dree was dreadful enough without my endeavouring to make it appear any more weird than in reality it was, I leave her with her back turned upon Lainshaw, and going out into the wilderness.

How she spent the weary years in her seclusion, I know not : but this I do know on unimpeachable authority, that her years were drawing to a close ere she dared return to her home, and that until the day that merciful death claimed her as its own, she never looked upon the face of a Montgomerie whose dwelling was outside the walls of Lainshaw. Her husband and her family were by her when she went down into the valley : but face of her husband's kin she never saw, because they had sworn it, that in the day they saw her she should surely die.

What she did can never be condoned. But she lived in other times than ours. And if, even according to the code of the times, not to say the laws of God, she was a sinful, guilty woman, she suffered, as it was right and meet she should suffer, and drank the cup of her own misdoing to its last bitter dregs.

CHAPTER XIII.

GABRIEL MONTGOMERIE'S FEELINGS HURT; HE RELIEVES THEM BY A DEED OF VENGEANCE.

THERE were days, long days, of mourning in the house of Lainshaw. When the family awoke to find their mother

gone, and her place at the table empty, their demands for explanation and their lamentations awoke anew the distress in the breasts of Sir Neill Montgomerie and his daughter Anna. They were the recipients of the secret. It was a secret they could not communicate ; a secret they could not share.

Sir Neill could say no more than that Lady Elizabeth had incurred the hostility of the Montgomeries, and that the Master of Eglinton had sworn to have revenge upon her, because she was a Cuninghame. He withheld further explanation and forestalled importunity, with the assurance that the time would come when the right would be done, when wrong now premeditated would be forgotten, and when the mother would return to her children to go no more away. And with this consolation they comforted themselves and one another.

Anna alone was, and to the full, her father's confidant. Sir Neill told her everything. He had to elicit sympathy somewhere ; and where better could he hope to find it than from his eldest daughter ? Anna was wise beyond her years, calm and self-possessed ; and though the story that her father told her, and the memories of her mother made her more a Cuninghame than a Montgomerie, they made her at the same time more her father's daughter, more loving, more sympathetic, braver, more self-reliant, more womanly than ever she had been before. She stepped into her mother's place as became a daughter called in such circumstances to such high functions ; and save for the dark, constant shadow that sat upon the house, the interior life of Lainshaw resumed in due time the even tenor of its way.

The Montgomeries, with the Master of Eglinton and Sir Robert of Skelmorlie at their head, had returned to the banks of the Lugton, and the Garnock, and the Irvine, and to the shores of the Firth of Clyde. They had ridden abroad and afar, and wherever they had gone they had left devastation, and blackness, and sorrow. They had fleshed their long swords till they were glutted with vengeance, and had pricked, rough riders as they were, furious over the homes and the hearts of the Cuninghames ;

and from plain and fold, from valley and sheepfold, from cot and castle, had risen to the heavens the cries of the oppressed and the bereaved. These had not even heart as yet to look for a deliverer. The heads of the house of Glencairn were lurking in secret, lest death should find them out and overtake them; and though their souls were dark and gloomy, and vengeance sat low in their hearts, they were so shattered and riven, that to rise up in the judgment against the Montgomeries, was meanwhile an impossibility.

And worse still, the Earl of Glencairn was staying his hand. The death of the Earl of Eglinton had been accomplished in his absence from Ayrshire; and when he had heard of it, he had washed his hands of it and forebore to come to the rescue. He might have rolled back the tide, but he forebore to try; on the contrary he declared that he had neither part nor lot in the deed, and refused to come between his adherents and the righteous judgment they had courted when, with sacrilegious and unholy hands, they had slain the chief of the Montgomeries by the ford of the Annick.

Henceforth the Montgomeries were to wait and to watch for their further revenge. Not one of those who had taken part in the murder—not one of the leaders, neither Aiket, nor Robertland, nor Clonbeith, nor Corsehill, nor John, Master of Glencairn, had been caught; all had escaped summary reprisal. But now that the lands of Glencairn had been swept, the leaders in the slaughter of the Earl were marked out for individual slaughter.

And it was in pursuance of this policy that the Master of Eglinton obtained a grant from the king in council, of the houses of Robertland and Aiket, and sent Gabriel Montgomerie of Hazelhead to dwell in the former with a party of followers sufficiently strong to hold the castle in the event of the Cuninghames attempting to retake it, and to carry on the campaign should occasion offer, against those who had premeditated the

affair by the Annick, and who had themselves hastened the Earl's untimely exodus from the world.

Gabriel's position was by no means an easy one. He held Robertland in virtue of the king's warrant, and therefore he had a right to be there. He had sworn to carry on the war of vengeance, and he was placed in the heart of the enemy's country, and had no reason to complain. He was animated with the bitterest of hatreds against the Lady Elizabeth, and would not have scrupled to take her life. The listening domestic had told his story, and Gabriel knew all, and he was charged with instructions by the Master of Eglinton, and bound by his instincts, to do unto the Lady Elizabeth, if Providence should but permit him the opportunity, what she had been instrumental in having done to the Earl of Eglinton.

Surely a clear line of duty was Gabriel Montgomerie's! And so it was, so far as it was a duty. He had no mind to shrink or to flinch from it. His was the place of honour, and he would do what he had to do should the heavens fall in the doing of it. And yet——

And yet——there was a girl in the question, and that was Anna Montgomerie.

Now, it will be readily conceded by anybody who thinks, it is not a pleasant situation to be placed in—to have sworn revenge against a girl's mother, and yet to have and to cherish a hankering after the girl herself. Far less is it consistent with the eternal fitness of things that a man should be burning to slay the mother of the girl for whom his heart is longing. It was not quite so bad as that with Captain Gabriel Montgomerie, but it was nevertheless something very near it.

Gabriel, when he had taken up his residence in Robertland, felt somewhat hypocritical. The Master of Eglinton, who knew nothing about Anna Montgomerie, had instructed him to be on friendly terms with Sir Neill. He was a Montgomerie; as bad luck would have it, he had married a Cuninghame; as bad luck would have it, the Cuninghame whom he married had raised her

hand against the House whose name she had elected to bear. But those things were not to shut Sir Neill himself outside the gates of Eglinton. Besides, had not the Lady Elizabeth fled to foreign parts and removed the one taint from the house of Lainshaw?

That was how the Master of Eglinton argued, if he ever argued at all, and that was how Gabriel argued with himself, and quite to his philosophical satisfaction; but he felt hypocritical for all that. For in his heart of hearts he meditated the killing of the Lady Elizabeth if he could only get her to kill, and he told himself that it was hardly decent that he should be on friendly terms with Sir Neill, and to commend himself to the good graces of Anna, when he had such a deed always before him.

But Gabriel had no alternative. To Lainshaw he was bound, and so to Lainshaw he went. The Fates would have it so, and the Fates would have their own way. So one evening, when the days were still lengthening out and coming nearer to midsummer, after he had taken his customary ride across the country to see whether he could not find Aiket, or Robertland, or Clonbeith, or Corsehill, or John, the Master of Kilmaurs, skulking in some plantation, or hiding behind some thorn bush, he repaired to Lainshaw, and bade the servant, who gave him admission, tell Sir Neill that he had come.

This the servant straightway did, and Sir Neill, like a Montgomerie as he was, and an hospitable man into the bargain, laid aside his habitual look of gloom, which always he wore, and bade him welcome; and then, being also in himself a straightforward man, and himself scorning devious and crooked paths, he said—

“There is no use to talk on, Gabriel, about things in general when both of us are thinking of something in particular. I am not going to blame you in any way for what you have done. You have done nothing more, I daresay, than your duty, and you mean to go on as you have begun.”

"That is true, Sir Neill," replied Gabriel, who was glad to have an opportunity to make a clean breast of it, "that is quite true. We have only done what Heaven and duty demanded that we should do, and we are not done yet."

"Well, you will be spared the stern necessity of wreaking an ounce of your vengeance on the Lady Elizabeth. She is included among your intended victims?"

"For your sake, Sir Neill, I grieve to say that she is included; but for my part I am not sorry to hear that she has left the country."

"She has gone away, Gabriel, and I am glad of it too. For had she elected to remain at home, Montgomerie and all as I am, I would have pierced the Master of Eglinton himself to the heart rather than I would have permitted him to harm a hair of her head."

"I do not doubt it, Sir Neill; and so for your sake as well as for her own, and for mine too, I am glad, I repeat, she is away. Besides, I have enough on hand."

"I thought you had done enough to have earned a respite from the work. You have harried the country-side and left it all but houseless and tenantless."

"Aye, Sir Neill, so we have. We have crippled the right arm of Glencairn so that he shall not be able to raise it for many a day to come. But we are not yet at an end, for all that. The principals in the murder of the Earl of Eglinton are yet at large."

"At large, Gabriel, if they have not indeed left the country. They were wise in their generation to escape ere the Montgomeries were upon their track."

"It remains to be seen, Sir Neill, whether they have escaped. The fox is hard to drive from his haunts. He will return to them when he is least expected. And so it may be with them. They have not answered to their names at the bar of the Council, and have been put to the horn; but we have seen men ere now will-

ing to risk all, their lives included, to be near what was once their own."

"That is true," replied Sir Neill, thinking of his wife, "nor can I blame them. I don't know that I should not do the same were I in their position."

"And so might I, Sir Neill; but whether or not, we'll do our duty. Love of their homes cannot save them—nothing can save them, if they only come within striking distance."

"Ah, well, Gabriel, it is a stern necessity; and necessity is the master of us all. But tell me—you have said that your vengeance is not yet accomplished—tell me whom you expect to find in this district?"

"Where else, Sir Neill," returned Gabriel, "would we expect to find the Cuninghames save in their own country-side? We cannot follow them, like common assassins, across the Border, and dog them with dagger and pistol. We cannot pursue them beyond the seas and slay them where we find them. No, our revenge is for home, and it is at home we intend to dispense it."

"Against whom, did you say?"

"Against all who took part in the murder of the Earl."

"All?"

"All without exception, Sir Neill. I am honest with you. I cannot deceive you, nor play a double part with you. Against all, I say again, without exception."

"And yet, sir," retorted Sir Neill, "you have the hardihood to come to Lainshaw!"

"Do not misunderstand me, Sir Neill. I know what underlies your question; but I tell you honestly that I would not have come hither had Lady Elizabeth not betaken herself elsewhere."

"But with murderous intent against my wife, you yet come to my house?"

"Not with murderous intent, Sir Neill. I have told you that I know Lady Elizabeth has fled the country; and what you call murderous intent, I call the justice of premeditated vengeance."

"A dear vengeance, Sir, it would have been for you. But let

that pass. I approve your outspoken honesty, Gabriel, nor am I going to blame you for speaking fearlessly; and you may come hither when you are so minded. But here comes Anna!"

And Anna it was—tall, dark, delicately featured, and self-possessed to the tips of her fingers. She greeted Gabriel neither warmly nor coldly, neither effusively nor distantly, and then sat her down to join in the conversation; whereupon Sir Neill, who had no heart for further talking, made excuse and left the room.

Gabriel wanted to get rid of conventionality with Anna Montgomerie; but he had to undergo a certain amount of it. He knew there was a gulf between them, and he wanted to bridge it and have done with it; but his uncertainty of the depth of the crevasse made the work more difficult and tedious than he liked. For a while the conversation was about the weather and the character of the summer and the simplicities suggested by nature without, animate and inanimate. But when this was done, the gulf was still there, and likely to remain unless it could be crossed with a bound. It was indeed growing wider and deeper, and Gabriel, seeing perfectly well that it would go on widening and deepening unless he could get to the other side, sprang across it.

"Your father and I, Anna, have been talking over matters—you know what matters. There's no use beating about the bush with you either, and the sooner we understand one another the better. I must either be a friend or a foe, and I want to know which it is to be."

"That all depends on yourself, Gabriel," replied Anna in her own quiet, self-possessed way. "You know better than I do your own position, and whether as a man of honour and of conscience you can offer us your friendship."

"I can, Anna, both in honour and in conscience, if you can receive my friendship on the same footing; but you must first understand why I am in Robertland at all."

"I understand it perfectly. You are here to wage war upon the Cuninghames. You are here to exterminate them root and

branch, if you can ; to break down their power ; to rob them of their strength ; to leave them but a memory haunting the country side that was once their own. You are here as a minister of vengeance."

"As a minister of justice, rather, Anna. I am here to do to the Cuninghames as they have done by us. I am here to pay them back for their misdeeds in their own coin, and to wipe out the murder of the Earl of Eglinton in blood."

"You are here, then, Gabriel, to do wrong that wrong may be redressed ; to do evil—not that good may come, but that what you call honour may be appeased. You are not a minister of justice, because it is not your province to administer justice."

"Justice is justice, Anna, no matter by whom it is administered—whether by the Privy Council, or by the High Court of Justiciary, or by me as an individual. And justice I must do, if I am to be true to myself and to the house of Montgomerie."

"You have asked me, Gabriel," replied Anna, "whether you are to be regarded as a friend or a foe, and I have told you first to reconcile your friendship with your sense of honour and with your conscience. You say you can reconcile it with both—were you to meet my mother as you were returning to Robertland, what would you do to her ?"

"Were your mother in the country, Anna ; had she not made good her going, I had not been here. The Montgomeries have sworn vengeance upon all who were in any way concerned in the murder of the Earl of Eglinton—upon all without exception."

"You have not answered my question, Sir. Were you to meet Lady Elizabeth Montgomerie, in what manner would you treat her ?"

"I cannot reply yea or nay to your question, because I cannot meet her, and because, were such a thing a possibility, I should not have given you the opportunity of putting such a question."

"In other words, Gabriel, had you reason to believe that you might be able to do vengeance upon my mother, you would have

preferred to do vengeance to becoming the guest, even for a short hour or two, of my father. You presume on his honour as a Montgomerie for no other reason than that you cannot get opportunity of doing what it is in your heart to do!"

Anna's reply stung Gabriel to the quick, and he replied angrily—

"I see, Anna. You have made up your mind. You will not make me welcome to Lainshaw, whoever may?"

"I have said no such thing. I am not going to determine your position for you," replied Anna, as calmly as ever. "I only put it as it seems to me it should be put, and it is for you to settle with your own conscience and your own sense of honour, what you shall do."

"Pardon me, Anna, but you do not leave me the freedom you profess to do. I can reconcile my coming hither both with honour and conscience, but if I cannot reconcile it with your sense of right, or with your prejudices, I have no alternative to staying without."

"That is not so, Gabriel. Satisfy yourself, and leave me out of the reckoning."

"I thought," Gabriel rejoined, growing a trifle haughty, "that a daughter of Sir Neill Montgomerie would have regarded such a matter as this from the standpoint of a Montgomerie!"

"I am the daughter of my mother, Gabriel," returned Anna, unmoved. "I am the daughter of my mother as well as of my father, and therefore as much a Cuninghame as I am a Montgomerie. Montgomerie is the name I bear, but the blood of the Montgomeries in my veins is mingled with the blood of the Cuninghames, and I am as true a daughter to my mother as I am to my father."

"Then, when I go hence, Anna, am I to go, not to return?"

"That is not for me to determine."

"It is for you to determine, Anna. I leave the matter in your hands."

"And I decline to accept any responsibility. Whatever you and my father may determine—let that be your guide."

"Then you leave me in the dark, Anna?"

"No, Gabriel, I leave you to the light of duty, of honour, of conscience; and it is your own fault if that light is darkness within you."

A conclusion which left Gabriel Montgomerie in greater darkness than ever, and sent him away moody and ill-tempered. Gabriel was honest enough as the times went, but his inclination, and a lurking sense of his duty, were at variance. He knew that he ought not to be making himself agreeable to Anna while all the while he would have slain her mother if he had only had the chance; but he was hurt that Anna should not have led him in the direction of his own inclination, and encouraged him to make himself at home at Lainshaw. It was true he was to do as he saw fit; but if his idea of the fitness of things was at variance with Anna's, his visits would be worse than useless.

So back to Robertland he went, and thought, and brooded, and nourished his enmity against the Cuninghame blood, and vowed to do his duty in the way of rooting out the barons who held faith with Glencairn and had sworn allegiance to him. And while he was in this humour, one of his followers, who had been scouring the country-side seeing what he could see, hearing what he could hear, and learning what he could learn, came in and informed him that Alexander Cuninghame of Aiket had returned to his home and that he was either in the castle itself or in hiding in the immediate neighbourhood.

Here was an opportunity to relieve his feelings and carry on his vengeance, and have it out with Anna Montgomerie. If Anna had a sense of duty, so had he. She had appealed to him to do his duty, and do it he would, and that instantly. And he prided himself thus on securing a double revenge.

Away, therefore, the Montgomeries rode with Gabriel at their head, to do justice upon the laird of Aiket. Alexander Cuninghame, true to the theory of the old fox returning to his

native earths, had forbore to wander. He had had enough of it. His heart was at home, and home he must go to keep his heart company. So quietly and stealthily he had sought Aiket, had entered within its walls, had visited the spots which had been ever present to his mind when he was a fugitive, and had resolved to secrete himself in the neighbourhood, so that when the tide of misfortune turned—if turn it ever should again—he might be at hand to retake possession. His goings had been observed, his whereabouts were known, his hiding-place had been descried; and now Gabriel and his fellows were on their way as hard as they could ride, to pay him back in kind for the deed in which he had joined by the ford of the Annick.

Alexander Cuninghame apprehended no immediate danger. He was walking abroad on his own fields, within sight of his own abode, amid scenes and memories that were intertwined with his very being. Oft had he seen the summer come and go in these quiet uplands; and many a winter's tale the landscape had to tell him.

But summer's sun, friendly as it had been to him, had done him its last favour; for, even as he walked amid the fresh green country and by the woodland, the Montgomeries surrounded him.

Gabriel had his revenge. The laird of Aiket could have fought one man; even on two or three he would not have turned his back. But a score against a unit!—the odds were too great. The Montgomeries hacked, and hewed, and slew him; and down he fell never to rise again. The summers were for others henceforth, not for him; the winter's tales for living men, not for dead.

When Gabriel had assured himself that the laird of Aiket was surely dead, he and his rode away. He was satisfied. He had done his duty—nothing more, nothing less. Even Anna, he said to himself, could not deny that.

And yet, when he reflected that the Laird of Aiket, whom he had left dead on the ground, was Lady Elizabeth Montgomerie's

brother, and therefore Anna's uncle, he was not quite sure whether his sense of duty and honour, and his conscience, all combined, might not lead him to confine himself to Robertland for a while, and thus necessitate him leaving Anna Montgomerie alone.

But if duty and honour and conscience are on the one side, and the heart on the other, who shall wonder if the heart obtain the mastery?

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FEUD GOES ON. GABRIEL RECEIVES, BUT DECLINES, COUNSEL.

THE fate that had befallen Alexander Cuninghame of Aiket quickened the goings of three of the other leading conspirators against the life of the Earl of Eglinton. Patrick Cuninghame, the laird of Corsehill, at once gave Ayrshire a wide berth. Where he went, and what he did until these troublous days were over and past, the record of the times does not say. The world was open to him. In the shires immediately adjacent to Ayrshire he was in constant danger, for the Montgomeries were as powerful in their allies as they were in their own inherent strength and resources; but beyond these he had little to fear. So whether he secluded himself amid the Scotch and English worthies who watched their respective borders with unceasing vigilance; or whether he sojourned in the English metropolis, amid whose din the far-off echo of Ayrshire strife was unheard; or crossed the seas to the Continent, where there was ever a field for the brave and the staunch, he at all events took such good care of himself that when the bruit had ceased, and peace once more reigned supreme, he was able to return to his own and to retake possession.

David Cuninghame of Robertland took ship for Denmark and sojourned at the Danish court, nor did he venture to return, until that most high and mighty prince James I. and VI., of blessed memory and other qualifications, which may be found by the curious prefacing Holy Writ, gave his hand and heart to Queen Anne. A courtier, Robertland succeeded in ingratiating himself with the Danish Queen bride, and, thanks to her influence with the said high and mighty prince, was restored to his own after four or five years had run their course, and lived to spend the remainder of his days in the halls of his fathers.

Hapless beyond these was Alexander Cuninghame of Clonbeith. His was a double share of guilt. It was he who had drawn the pistol that put an end to the journey, and to the life of the Earl of Eglinton; and therefore it was meet that the sternest retribution should be done upon him. Beyond them all, he must die the death for the deed he had done; and knowing what was predetermined against him, he fled. But his going was known, and fly he never so swiftly, the avengers of blood were upon his track. No "questioning" bloodhound ever followed upon a surer and more deadly trail than did the Montgomeries upon his; the Master of Eglinton at their head, and Gabriel of Hazelhead among them.

Married to a lady of the family of Lainshaw, John Pollock of that Ilk, in the shire of Renfrew, had championed the cause of the Montgomeries against the Cuninghames, and when the Master of Eglinton went out in pursuit of the baron of Clonbeith, he rode by his side.

Clonbeith was apprised of their coming, nor did he spare whip and bridle to make good his escape. Ayrshire was his native land, but it was no land for him now, and all the long summer day he travelled onwards, nor did he rest until he had reached a friendly house in the town of Hamilton. And there he remained at rest in the confident assurance that he had outwitted the chase.

But not so. The human sleuth-hounds pursued their human

quarry undeviating, and stuck to their trail so persistently and to such purpose that they came hard upon the heels of the fugitive, and reined up in front of the house in Hamilton where Clonbeith had obtained shelter.

Dismounting, they entered the house, and demanded of the owner that Clonbeith should be given up to them. The owner gave them assurance that Clonbeith was not within, and in token of faith voluntarily bade them search the dwelling. They searched it. They sought high and low. From attic to basement they ransacked its every corner, and were about to give up the search when Pollock of that ilk, than whom none was more determined, bethought himself to examine the chimney of the dwelling.

And there, in the wide chimney, they found Clonbeith. With a loud shout Pollock announced the discovery he had made, and reaching up the chimney he caught Alexander Cuninghame by the leg and dragged him down. Short shrift had he. With one consent, with no preliminaries, the Montgomeries and their ally fell upon him, nor did they cease from their retributive fury until the unfortunate laird of Clonbeith lay dead upon the floor. And when they were satisfied that they had done their work, and done it well, they sheathed their swords again and rode away.

No man of all the Montgomeries was better pleased with the grim procession of vengeance than was Gabriel of Hazelhead, the guardian of the house of Robertland; and yet in his elation he doubted more and more what the result would be, in the reception which he should have at the hands of Anna Montgomerie. She did not scruple to say that she was a Cuninghame as much as she was a Montgomerie, and he feared lest the misfortunes of the house of Glencairn should result in strengthening her sympathy with those who were paying so dear a price for the slaughter of the chief of the Montgomeries. Anna was more likely, he told himself, to share her regrets with those who were suffering day by day, than to be elated because justice was being done upon the whole Cuninghame fraternity, because of the one

dark deed which a few of their number had instigated, and a few more had carried out.

But, nevertheless, to Lainshaw he must go, and to Lainshaw he went. The only difference he noticed in or about the dwelling was, that Sir Neill Montgomerie had engaged a new butler, and Gabriel drew the conclusion that the last had been too pronounced a sympathiser with the Montgomeries, and had offended the sensibilities of the half Cuninghames, half Montgomeries, who constituted the family circle. Gabriel did not like the change. There are few men who do like anything they do not understand, when they think they have a right to understand it.

It was the new butler who let him in, and who showed him to the dining room, where he found Anna Montgomerie sitting alone, her deft fingers plying her needle and thread. She looked cold—not physically—but cold in the eyes of Gabriel. There was no effusiveness in her greeting; indeed, if anything, she was more distant than she had been on the last occasion on which he had visited Lainshaw. She put her hand into his with a distinct reservation that seemed to Gabriel to say that her hand was her own—at least that it was certainly not his, and then she sat down and waited until he should begin the conversation.

Gabriel was a good conversationalist as the times went; but, a man of the times, he had only the times to talk about, and these, so far as he was concerned, consisted almost wholly in the propagation of the feud against the house of Glencairn. So when he had rid himself of his stock of conventionalities, he was fairly at a standstill. But he had to say something, and regarded as a sort of semi-providential idea that had come into his head, the circumstance of the new butler.

"I see, Anna," he said, "that you have got rid of your old butler?"

"Yes, he has been gone these three days," replied Anna.

"I thought he was a good butler?" said Gabriel.

"So he was," returned Anna.

"He wanted to go, did he?"

"No."

"Then you dismissed him?"

"Well, we told him he could look out for another situation, and he took the hint and looked out."

"Queer!" observed Gabriel, thoughtfully.

"No, not queer at all. Surely we can do what we like in Lainshaw?"

"Oh, certainly you can; but it is rather queer isn't it, to dismiss a servant with whom you have no fault to find?"

"I never said that."

"You said he was a good butler."

"So he was, and I say it again."

"Well. You don't find fault with his goodness, do you?"

"No. If you must know, we dismissed him because he was too strong a partisan, in a house like this. We don't mean to join in this feud now, on the one side or the other, and so we decided to rid Lainshaw of the only man in the house who was an open and determined foe to the Cuninghames."

"That would have been a recommendation to me, Anna."

"I know it would, and not to you only, but to many another Montgomerie besides. But I have told you already that, saving my father, we are all akin to the Cuninghames as we are to the Montgomeries, and we do not mean to take sides against our own flesh and blood."

"Then, Anna, your sympathies are with the Cuninghames?"

"I have not said so. I have no approval for the men who waylaid and killed the Earl of Eglinton; but I have none either for those who think the great end of their being is to pursue a career of vengeance instead of leaving justice to be done by the courts of the kingdom."

"Then you have no sympathy for me?"

"Not at present," replied Anna, without deviating by a hair's breadth from the path of quiet self-possession. "None at present, I say. What have you been doing these last few days, that I should have any special sympathy with you?"

"Duty—I have been doing my duty."

"That is how you look at it, Gabriel. Vengeance is not a duty to you. Justice is a duty, done by the State, but yours is not justice. You are not accredited to do justice."

"Blood for blood, Anna. Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed."

"Yes, but shed legally. Read the verse as applicable to yourself as well as to the slayers of the Earl of Eglinton. If it holds good in the one case, why not in the other?"

"Because there is no analogy. The killing of the Earl was murder; ours is the working out of the atonement for the murder—nothing less."

"It does not so appear to me, Gabriel, and therefore I cannot sympathise with you. You have slain many for the death of one. You have burned the houses of peasants who never heard of the slaughter of the Earl: is that justice? You have slain the peasants themselves, who were no more concerned in the Earl's death than you yourself were—do you call that justice? You have destroyed cattle and sheep—wherein did they sin? You have set fire to the grain in the stack-yards—after what sort did it offend? No, Gabriel, yours is not justice; it is vengeance, it is revenge, and I cannot bid you prosper in your work or wish you joy of it."

"These were not the views or the sentiments of the Cuninghames, Anna, when they waylaid the Earl and murdered him."

"I am not defending that deed, and can never defend it," replied Anna; "but because they sinned, is that excuse that you should transgress?"

"But this," rejoined Gabriel, driven from one position to another, "is not an individual retaliation. It is a life-lasting family feud."

"That is, alas, too true; but what is wrong in an individual is wrong in a family; and the larger the number who take part in a wrong, the greater is the wrong itself. You cannot break

up and distribute a sin among you. It remains a sin to one and all, just the same."

"I see, Anna, it is no use trying to change your sentiments, but I hold for all that that the wrong has been on the side of the Montgomeries."

"And I tell you again, Gabriel, that two wrongs can never make one right. Do you imagine, too, that I can forget for a moment that you joined in the slaughter of my own mother's brother, or that you helped to bring about the death of my kinsman of Clonbeith? And can I forget that your justice, as you call it, has driven hence from Lainshaw my mother, and from Robertland and Corsehill my relatives and friends?"

"Whatever you may say, Anna, you cannot deny that they deserved to suffer?"

"I have not said they were innocent or that they ought to have been permitted to escape punishment. But none of them wronged you personally. Their misdeeds were punishable by law, and to the course of legal justice you should have left them."

"I'm afraid, Anna, I must give it up. Your mind is not to be swayed by a sense of what is due to the house of Montgomerie."

"I trust, Gabriel, that my mind never will be swayed by a longing for revenge; and as there is an impassible gulf between us, there is no need longer to discuss a matter on which we are never likely to agree."

"I suppose we never can agree on this point, and I am still in a quandary whether I should come to Lainshaw or not."

"You need not be in a quandary then. As I told you before, you must be regulated by your conscience and your sense of honour, and I am not going to take the responsibility of relieving you from determining what is your duty. You may come, you may stay away, just as you please, but, whether you come or whether you stay away, you must settle it for yourself without any aid from me."

"You refuse then, Anna, to give me any advice?"

"I do. I refuse most decidedly. I cannot regard things from your standpoint. Your way is as wide apart from mine as the one pole from the other. You are a man of war, I am a woman of peace. You live for revenge, though you call it justice; I live for justice, which is not revenge; and therefore I cannot see with your eyes, or reason with your reason. And really, Gabriel, you ought to know your duty without coming to me to enquire concerning it."

"At all events, Anna, I shall have to discover what my duty is for myself, and until I so discover it—good-bye."

Gabriel was not in the most enviable frame of mind when he took his departure. He knew only too well, though slow to confess it, that he and Anna were, as she had said, as wide asunder as the poles; but the more distant he was from Anna, the stronger was the attraction. The more she repelled him with her words, the more she attracted him by the graces of her mind as well as of her person.

Ere he left Lainshaw, Gabriel encountered Sir Neill Montgomerie and Captain Stewart, the latter on a visit to the house. They had gone out to walk together, and to confer regarding the events that were transpiring around them; and, now returning to Lainshaw, they met Gabriel as he was leaving.

"What, Gabriel!" said Sir Neill, "going away so soon? Has Anna frozen up your geniality, for you look as solemn and as serious as a monk?"

"Or a stern father of the kirk," added Captain Stewart, smiling a pleasant greeting to the young laird of Hazelhead.

"What I look like I don't know, and I don't care either," replied Gabriel somewhat savagely; "but I am free to confess that Anna and I don't seem to harmonise in our views."

"No, I daresay not," responded Sir Neill, "especially if you have been trying to persuade her that you are doing good service in endeavouring to exterminate the whole race of Glencairn."

"I am surprised, Sir Neill, to find Anna maintain the views

that seem to animate her. I had thought otherwise, and better, of a daughter of the house of Montgomerie."

"I can quite understand that you thought otherwise, but I can hardly admit that you thought better of her when you imagined that she would be hand and glove with you in your sympathies with the house of Eglinton. For you are as well aware as I that the house of Lainshaw has not been treated in this matter as it ought to have been by the Montgomeries, and that there are circumstances that must necessarily weigh heavily with my daughter, apart altogether from that."

"These things may be so," replied Gabriel; "and I doubt not that Anna is influenced by the considerations to which you refer, but none the less she ought at least to have as much regard for the family whose name she bears, as for the family whose name her mother bears."

"And so she has, I'll be bound," returned Sir Neill. "I don't call your sense of duty in question, Gabriel, but I am astonished that you could expect otherwise of Anna. She knows as well as you do that if Lady Elizabeth had been at home your vengeance would have included her in its scope. You have not denied it—you have not attempted to deny it, and therefore I should have been more than surprised had you found in her a sympathiser in your crusade—your indiscriminate crusade—against the whole race of Cuninghame."

"By my faith!" retorted Gilbert, "but I seem to have fallen into a veritable nest of Cuninghames."

"Not so, Gabriel. No truer, stauncher Montgomerie breathes God's air than the man who is now talking to you, though, like Anna, I confess now, that I think the law should have been allowed to take its course, and not have been set aside by private revenge and wholesale slaughter and destruction."

"Sir Neill, that was not your opinion the morning you rode across to Robertland to take part in the fray. You would have led the fighting that morning."

"Wisdom comes by thinking, Gabriel; it is not the product

of hasty resolve. I confess I would have joined you in the fray ; but since then I have reasoned out the matter with myself and I have come to another finding."

"You have been consulting at the shrine of Anna, Sir Neill, I fear !" replied Gabriel, sneeringly.

"I am not ashamed to have learnt wisdom at any source, certainly not at the lips of my child," retorted Sir Neill, coldly.

"I thought as much," Gabriel replied, "and now I can but regret that you are so advised ; but with me a duty is a duty not to be shirked. The Master of Eglinton has laid a responsibility on me that I cannot get rid of, and that I would not get rid of if I could, and therefore I must go my way till the right be done and the great wrong redressed. Is that not the true wisdom, sir ?"

The question was addressed to Captain Stewart.

"You have asked my opinion, Captain Montgomerie," replied Captain Stewart, "and therefore you must not be offended if I speak freely. I am not concerned in this struggle, and am therefore better able to take an unprejudiced and unbiased view of it than you are. I agree with Sir Neill Montgomerie, and his daughter, Miss Montgomerie. I appeal to my judgment, and it tells me that no permanent good can arise from such a struggle as that in which you are engaged. It is disastrous to society, to the district, to the country, when those who ought to be the pillars of law and order, are the men who set law and order at defiance, and weaken the power of the crown which ought to be supreme in such concerns as these. I appeal to my experience, which is not small, and I can tell you truthfully that, pursuing this policy of vengeance, what befalls the one side to-day may befall the other to-morrow. And should it not be so, a prolonged and a drastic revenge such as yours naturally begets you enemies in quarters where you cannot afford to have enemies. I appeal to the simple question of right. Can you justify in the aggregate what you cannot in detail ? Can you make wholesale good out of a series of evils ? Believe me, sir, your policy and

your course of action are wrong ; they are reactionary ; they are certain to provoke retaliation ; and you may depend on this, that while you may injure the house of Glencairn to-day, the time is not far distant when that house will rise anew to the position it held ere the vengeance of Eglinton was evoked."

"Enough, Sir, enough," hastily ejaculated Gabriel, "you are all of a pack, and Lainshaw is no place for me. When I thought to find myself among friends, I find myself surrounded by enemies."

"A friend, young man," replied Captain Stewart, "is not less a friend that he speaks unpalatable truths."

With this truism ringing in his ears, Gabriel rode off, more distracted than ever, to Robertland, where he drew fresh supplies of tenacity from his fellow-Montgomeries, and where he fortified himself for the further prosecution of the crusade against the Cuninghames. Gabriel was not to be convinced against his will.

CHAPTER XV.

THE KING'S COMMISSIONERS MAKE ENQUIRY.

ONE fine day in the summer, when Sir Neill Montgomerie was meditating on the course of events, and wondering what next the Fates would unfold, there arrived at Lainshaw two strangers. They rode boldly among their attendants. An air of authority sat on them. They marked the country with official eye, and they cast their calm, self-possessed, matter-of-fact glances to right and to left, as if none had a right to question either their business or their pleasure. They had already been in Ayrshire for a month, and had gone hither and thither at will. They had called upon Sir Robert Montgomerie at Skelmorlie, had rusticated at Eglinton Castle, had taken counsel with Mont-

gomerie, the sage of Stane, at his castle at Irvine ; and now, having completed their visit to that part of the division, they had come to Lainshaw, to the borderland of the Cuninghames and Montgomeries, to hold intercourse with Sir Neill Montgomerie at Lainshaw.

Their movements were uncertain. Where they listed to go, there they went. Where they choose to remain, there they remained until it suited their convenience to depart. And all the while they maintained that air of officialism that stamped them as the representatives of a greater power that lay behind them.

The strangers might well ride boldly. They were the King's Commissioners. The monarch had deputed them to visit the west land, and to make the fullest investigation into the feud of the North Ayrshire families, and they had unlimited power to elicit what they sought from his Majesty's lovites of each degree ; to trace the quarrel to its source, to look for its mainsprings, to find where lay the responsibility, and to ascertain what direct and what side issues were concerned in the unhappy developments of the feud.

There was no door closed to them. The Earl of Glencairn received them as hospitably as did the Master of Eglinton ; and, now that they had halted at the gate of Lainshaw, Sir Neill Montgomerie came down in haste and bid them welcome.

Who the Commissioners were I cannot say. They came officially ; and having done deference to them in one short chapter, I shall let them depart. They only pass across the scene ; they do not linger on it. And when I have done with them, I shall let them depart to the Scottish court to give in their report to the sovereign.

And with all respect to them, I should not even introduce them, were it not for a purpose that may be gathered from the conversation which they had with Sir Neill of Lainshaw.

"We have shown you our commission," said the elder of the two, who took upon himself the burden of the interview, and

who was careful not to broach business until he had satisfied the cravings of the inner man, "We have shown you our commission, and explained why we have come hither. You are reputed a man of sense and discretion, Sir Neill, and we doubt not, therefore, you will lend us your aid."

"That will I gladly," Sir Neill replied, "but may I make bold enough to ask you what purpose His Majesty hopes to effect by this investigation?"

"That is for the King to say," returned the Commissioner; "but you may depend on it, His Majesty will act wisely, whatever he does. He is pained that Ayrshire should be so riven and torn by dissention, and he must needs probe the sore to the bottom so that he may discover the root of the evil."

"It will not be my fault should His Majesty fail of his intent," returned Sir Neill, "and therefore I am ready to give you such information as lies in my power, in the hope that His Majesty's gracious purpose may be realised; but I fear me, none the less, that the end will be difficult to attain."

"It will not be easy," was the reply, "but the King knows no impossibilities in a matter of this kind, and he is personally concerned to see peace reign in every part of his kingdom. I have no desire to question you, Sir Neill, after such a fashion as to evoke painful recollection on your part. We have been informed on all hands that Lady Elizabeth Montgomerie, your wife, was art in part with her relatives who slew the Earl of Eglinton, and that she has taken guilt to herself, as the Cuninghames of Robertland and Corsehill have done, and left the country?"

Sir Neill bowed assent.

"The fact itself seems to be conclusive, and therefore there is no need to enlarge on it," resumed the Commissioner, "but I wish to ask you whether you have any reason to believe that Lady Elizabeth had any feeling of personal hostility to the Earl of Eglinton?"

"None whatever."

"She simply, then, regarded her action as a justifiable incident in the feud?"

"More than a justifiable incident—she regarded it as a duty."

"I can understand that," replied the Commissioner, "though I cannot condone it. However, taking that for granted, I wish to ask you something that more immediately concerns yourself. You are reported as intimate with Captain Stewart of Ochiltree—is that so?"

"Captain Stewart is a friend of mine."

"A dangerous friend, surely?"

"No, sir, a valued friend."

"You know him—you know who he is?"

"I do. I know his history from first to last. I know what he has done, and how much he has undergone; and I know, therefore, that his counsel is valuable."

"Aye, his honest counsel," replied the Commissioner. "That he is a man of experience we know, but that he is a safe counsellor I very much doubt."

"That may be, sir; but nevertheless I do regard him as a valued friend, whose advice makes for good."

"You know that he is distrusted by our royal master?"

"I do."

"And that not without cause?"

"That may be, sir; but I speak of him as I find him, and I can say truthfully, and as an honourable man, that, throughout this sore trial, his counsel has been peaceful."

"It was not always so," observed the younger of the two Commissioners, "and I venture to think you are ill-advised in consorting with one of such dangerous principles and questionable record."

"I speak of him," returned Sir Neill, "as I have said, as I have found him; nor do I concern myself with what he has been or with what he has done. He has profited by his experience, else I misjudge him greatly."

"Was he on terms of intimacy with Lady Elizabeth?" asked the elder Commissioner, taking up the conversation.

"He has always, since his return to Ayrshire, been received on a friendly footing by myself and by the members of my family, and therefore he was intimately acquainted with Lady Elizabeth."

"I wish to know this particularly, Sir Neill—had he opportunity of conversing with Lady Elizabeth between the time that Lord Eglinton's coming to Lainshaw was announced and the date of his lordship's arrival?"

"He had not. He did not know that the Earl was coming hither until the day of his lordship's arrival, and therefore he could not possibly have had opportunity of conferring with my wife. Whatever arrangements were made for the slaughter of the Earl were made before that day."

"You are confident on that point?"

"As confident as that I am a living man. I repeat, Captain Stewart has advised all along to a peaceful issue of the dispute between the Montgomeries and the house of Glencairn, and had his advice been followed the feud would have been at an end instead of being unhappily accentuated as it has been by the slaying of the Earl."

"Yet he was present in your house when the deed was done?"

"So was I, sir, and yet you do not insinuate that I had aught to do with it?"

"Because we know otherwise."

"And I know he was as innocent as I. Can you think for a moment that had he been privy to the deed, he would have been personally on evidence when the deed was done?"

"Captain Stewart is not an ordinary man, Sir Neill, and his motives and actions are therefore not to be weighed in the balances with those of ordinary people. And if His Majesty thought for a moment that his generous clemency towards him had been so ill-requited, and that instead of living the quiet life of a country gentleman, Captain Stewart was mixing himself up with the embroilments of the country side, he would withdraw

the sufferance he has hitherto extended to him, and mete out to him the due reward of his earlier deeds."

"I can vouch for his innocence on soul and conscience," replied Sir Neill, earnestly. "He had neither part nor lot in this transaction, and knew as little as you did regarding it, until the fatal blow had been struck, and the Earl of Eglinton lay dead by the ford of the Annick."

"'Tis well for him if that be so," responded the Commissioner, "and I cannot doubt the sincerity of your belief."

"I would that all men were as innocent as he," said Sir Neill.

"And I thank God," retorted the Commissioner, "that few men are so doubly dyed with blood."

"It is not for man to judge his fellows," replied Sir Neill. "Judge not that ye be not judged."

"And yet," said the Commissioner, "it is the glory of kings to search out a matter."

The Commissioners remained at Lainshaw during the next three days, and thence they made incursions to the castles and lands of the Cuninghames. They visited Gabriel Montgomerie in Robertland, and they gave audience to Lady Cuninghame of the same house, who emerged from the privacy in which she was living in the abode of one of her husband's tenants, and made complaint of the conduct of Gabriel and his followers. They had ruined her property, she said, with the tears streaming down her cheeks; destroyed her farm steadings, cut down the fruit trees in her orchards, robbed the castle of Robertland of its valuables, and suffered general disorder and decay to creep over her possessions. The Commissioners listened to what she had to say and promised to lay her complaint before the king, and then they went on to Aiket and Corsehill, and Auchenharvie, and Kilmaurs. Time and again they reined up their horses by the ford of the Annick, where the murdered Earl had lain, and took note of the surroundings, and then passed away to carry on their investigations elsewhere. And each evening, when the day's work was done, they returned to Lainshaw to dine, and to

discuss, and to draw out their reports, and to receive their despatches.

They were seated at dinner one evening when a courier arrived post haste with instructions that they were to proceed without loss of time to Paisley to investigate the latest deed in the feudal war of reprisal. Sir Robert of Skelmorlie, with a band of his followers, had ridden to the town on the green banks of the Cart, and there he had encountered John Maxwell of Stainly, a friend and ally of the Cuninghame family, whose abode was by the northern base of the braes of Gleniffer. Sir Robert was a man of hot and fiery passion; and meeting Maxwell on the street, he had fallen upon him and slain him, and then had ridden thence back into Ayrshire content that he had done his duty.

The laird of Stainly had not participated in the fateful event by the Annick, but at least two members of the Maxwell family had—Maxwell of Kilmalcolm and Maxwell of Dalquhane. That was sufficient justification in the eyes of Sir Robert Montgomerie that he should visit the iniquities of Kilmalcolm and Dalquhane upon the laird of Stainly; and visited them he accordingly had, and that relentlessly and remorselessly, to the slaughter of the hated Maxwell, and to the incurring of the ire of Patrick Maxwell of Newark, who was even now pondering how best he could recompense upon the head of Sir Robert of Skelmorlie the evil he had done upon his relative of Stainly.

“More evil tidings,” said the one Commissioner to the other, when he had read the despatch communicating the tidings.

“Is the fire spreading?” asked his fellow.

“Aye, it has broken out in Renfrewshire, in the very town of Paisley itself, and the first man to burn is one Maxwell of Stainly.”

“What evil has he done that he should so suffer?”

“None that I know of, save that he is an ally of the house of Glencairn.”

“At whose hand has he met his doom?”

"At the hand of Sir Robert Montgomerie of Skelmorlie, who encountered him the other day on the street of Paisley, and left him lying dead on the crown of the causeway."

As the Commissioner thus told his fellow the tidings, the butler, who was standing behind Sir Neill with a wine decanter in his hand, uttered an ejaculation and let the decanter fall to the floor.

Sir Neill turned angrily upon him.

"What means this carelessness, William?" he demanded.

"I beg your pardon, Sir," replied the abashed butler, "the decanter slipped from my fingers."

"You must be more careful," curtly retorted Sir Neill. "You will excuse him, gentlemen," he continued, addressing the Commissioners, "he is but a young man, and not over-accustomed to dispensing the wine to such distinguished visitors as His Majesty's Commissioners."

"No need to say anything about it, Sir Neill," replied the elder of the Commissioners. "The accident was a mere nothing, and I hope you will not further remember it."

"At your request, Sir, I shall say no more about it," Sir Neill returned, "and I have no doubt the memory of it will teach him to be more careful. I hope the tidings you have received from Renfrew will not unduly hasten your departure?"

"Not unduly, but we shall have to take our departure in the morning. The King's business requires haste, you know, and if this conflagration is to be kept from spreading further, we must be instant in our endeavours to check it. Else the whole west country will be in flames.

"Sir Robert of Skelmorlie was ever hot-headed and impetuous," said Sir Neill, "and jealous, even to slaying, of the family honour."

"And he will meet the fate of all hot-headed and impetuous men in these parts, unless we can secure that wiser counsels should prevail. There is not a remaining Cuninghame nor a

Maxwell that will not think that Heaven has constituted him an avenger of blood."

The Commissioners took their departure the following day. They went off in dignified haste—that is to say, they maintained their dignity without unnecessarily sacrificing over-much time. They were too dignified to scurry or to hurry away, or ride across country at breakneck speed, or to take short cuts from one point to another. That was not the way of Government Commissioners in those good days of old, and it is not their way now.

When they had gone, and when social calm and quiet had once more descended on Lainshaw, Sir Neill Montgomerie called his butler into the library. Anna was there.

"This will never do, William," said Sir Neill sternly; "I run risk and to spare, having you in the house at all, and yet you go and proclaim your feelings in the presence of the King's Commissioners. You don't need to offer any explanation. The accident of the decanter was caused by the tidings of the slaughter of your friend from Gleniffer. Is that not so?"

"I am afraid it is, Sir Neill, if I must make excuse. I was so taken aback when I heard of his death that I could not refrain from the involuntary ejaculation you heard; and then, before I knew what I was doing, the decanter went smash out of my hands."

"I know it did, and its fall and your conscience-stricken looking face very nearly made me as nervous as you were yourself."

"I'll be careful in the future, Sir Neill, but I should like to crave a few days' absence just now."

"Not a day," shortly replied Sir Neill, at the same time looking towards Anna.

"Not an hour," said Anna.

"Well, I suppose I must yield, but if you only sanction my departure for a few brief days——"

"Not a day I repeat," said Sir Neill. "Do you think I am a fool? I know your motive as well as you do. You are going,

if you obtain permission, to Newark, to stir Patrick Maxwell to instant revenge; and I neither can nor will permit it. Is it not enough that your father has had to flee the country? Is it not enough that I incur a risk—a grave, a serious risk—in having you under my roof tree at all? Is it not enough that were your intentions known, you would assuredly have to die the death for the misdeeds of your father? Is it not enough that I have been so weak as to give you shelter, so that you may be near your own, should circumstances ever restore you to the lands of your forefathers? Have I not yielded to Anna in this matter, contrary to my better judgment? And now, forsooth, you would fain leave the shelter of Lainshaw, and run your neck into danger?”

“I should be ungrateful indeed, Sir Neill, were I to involve you in any risk, but I have been so long on the continent of Europe that I am not likely to be recognised, and, if the house of Glencairn is not to be exterminated—”

“The house of Glencairn can take care of itself, William, better than you can take care of it. Why should you court danger? And if you are so careless as to put your neck in the halter, I am not going to permit you to put mine in at the same time. What do you say, Anna?”

“I agree with you, father. William must not go hence without our permission, and that permission he cannot have. There is suffering enough and to spare among the Cuninghames already, and he is incapable of retrieving the disaster. Only time can do that and the Earl of Glencairn, and if they fail to do it the cause is hopeless.”

“Not hopeless,” replied William—who was none other than the son and heir of Cuninghame of Robertland, and therefore full cousin to Anna Montgomerie—“The cause cannot be hopeless. If the Cuninghames accept the inevitable it will be hopeless indeed, but they are strong enough to regain their own without any Court influence or other means than their own right hand. What they have done before, they can do again.”

“You are not to transform my house, William,” said Sir Neill

sternly, "into a coign of vantage against the house of Montgomerie. Remember, I am a Montgomerie, though I am a man of peace, and I will be no party to any intrigue that is carried on against Eglinton, least of all to an intrigue begotten in Lainshaw. So if you go hence, you shall not return. I have sanctioned this scheme—weakly sanctioned it, apparently—at the request of my daughter Anna; and here you must remain or else take your departure to return no more."

"Then I suppose I must bow to the inevitable and remain where I am?"

"You must, if you are to remain at all," replied Anna firmly. "The only alternative to your remaining where you are is that you must leave the district, and not return to it until peace is restored."

"That might be never," returned William Cuninghame smiling bitterly. "So I remain where I am."

CHAPTER XVI.

SIR ROBERT OF SKELMORLIE CONTINUES TO SLAY AND MEETS HIS DUE REWARD.

ALEXANDER CUNINGHAME of Montgreenan, was commendator of the Abbey of Kilwinning—that ancient abbey that stands in its ruins on the banks of the Garnock. A fair pile and a stately it was in the days ere yet the morning star of the Reformation was seen in the sky. Its grey walls were centuries old. During the long years its cells had been tenanted, its cloisters made vocal by the monks of the ancient Catholic faith; but when the last of the abbots was killed in 1571 in a skirmish at Restalrig, near Edinburgh, all that was strictly monastic in the abbey was demolished, and it was allowed, surrounded by its rich lands, to go to decay.

When the last of the Abbots had gone—the last of a long race, and a powerful—Alexander Cuninghame of Montgreenan was appointed commendator. His forbear, Sir William Cuninghame of Kilmaurs, in goodly fellowship with Hugh de Morville, lord of the district of Cuningham, and Lord High Constable of Scotland, Robert I., Hugh de Morville of the same exalted family as the High Constable, John de Menetheth, lord of Arran, and Sir John Maxwell of Maxwell, had gifted to the infant church in the twelfth century, wealth of land for its sustenance; and now that the sound of the mass was heard no more within its walls, now that the feet of the monks were stilled on the floors, and the voices of the choristers were silent under its fretted roof, the laird of Montgreenan obtained the commendatorship, and with it the revenues of the abbey.

Guardian of the sacred places, he was nevertheless a Cuninghame, and that was sufficient in the eyes of the fiery knight of Skelmorlie, that he should pay the price of his blood relationship. And accordingly, Sir Robert Montgomerie, zealous to extirpation, and resolved to carry his vengeance, even to the extreme verge of revenge, determined on his death.

It is but a repetition of the old story. Sir Robert had returned from Paisley with the blood of Maxwell of Stainly, on his soul. Not on his conscience. He had but done, as he told himself, what Maxwell would have done to him. He had diminished, by one powerful scion of a powerful coalition, the number of the enemies of Eglinton. He had brought the Montgomeries nearer by one step to supremacy in the north of Ayrshire, and on the verge of Renfrew; and, relying still on the strong arm, he set about the accomplishment of the slaughter of the commendator of Kilwinning.

Feeling secure in his semi-ecclesiastical character, the Commendator had hitherto watched from the shelter of Montgreenan, the raging of the social warfare near at hand and at a distance. His soul had been vexed and stirred within him, as he had heard tell of the raid of the Montgomeries, and how, one

by one, his kinsmen according to the flesh had either been slain or forcibly expatriated. Gladly would he have seen the Cuninghames arise in force as they had done before, and roll back the tide of the Eglinton invasion of their possessions ; but resident in the very centre of the Montgomerie strength, susceptible to retaliation should he interfere actively in the cause of his friends, and anxious to retain the handsome benefits that accrued from the commendatorship, he had done nothing further than urge his brother, the powerful Earl of Glencairn, that he should use his influence at the Scottish Court to have justice done upon those who, a law unto themselves, were now harrassing and persecuting the Cuninghame family to the death. Alexander Cuninghame walked warily and wisely.

But Sir Robert of Skelmorlie was not to be deterred by barriers, even though these should be semi-ecclesiastical. He had cast his eyes on the broad acres of the abbacy ; and his lust for blood had not been sated, either by the raid upon the lands of the foe, or by the slaughter of the laird of Stainly. Accordingly he repaired in person to Montgreenan, and there lay in waiting, until opportunity should favour him.

And favour him it did. For all unthinking of danger the Commendator came forth from the gates. He came to walk, or to talk, or to do business in this world, not to be ushered into the next. His intentions were with time ; fate was about to relegate him to eternity.

It was the summer time, and the landscape all round was smiling and shining under the light of day. It is a fitful climate ours ; but once in a while in the long summer days, there comes a charming epoch when life is a joy—evanescent, but yet a joy. Everything stands out with a clearness and a personality that no oriental skies can beat. The vault overhead is blue, save where the fleecy clouds, light driven by the gentle western wind from the sea, go sailing across it. The woodland and the copse, the fields and the hedgerows are all of green, and they fall refreshing upon the gaze. Far out from the ken the plains lie stretched,

flecked here and there with the cattle and the sheep ; and against the distant horizon—distant yet near—the hills stand out, each crag and scaur fresh from the Creator's hand. Life is dreamy in the drooping heat. The birds chirrup softly in the copse, and though the lark rains down his song, the brown songster of the skies is so omnipresent in his lay that his melody falls on the listener all but unconsciously. The bee hums by, lilting its own little monotone, and the air is alive with insect melody. Peace sits upon everything.

Alas that a scene so fair should be so evanescent, and that it should enrobe sins so many and passions so evil !

Before the Commendator of Kilwinning, as he emerged from Montgreenan, lay a scene that was all the fairer to him that it was part of his every day life. All and whole, he knew it well, each clump of trees, each belt of woodland, the slumbering downs, the flowing streams, the gently sloping hills.

The day would come when he should look upon it all for the last time. But surely that day was yet in the distance ?

Not so, for hardly had Alexander Cuninghame left the vicinity of his own dwelling than he was encountered by Sir Robert of Skelmorlie. Sir Robert was not in harmony with the softening influences of nature ; he was aflame with in-begotten revenge, which all the healing touches of nature could neither soften nor alleviate.

And out upon the yielding air fell the sharp crack of a pistol. Well and true was the aim ; straight sped the bullet ; the Commendator staggered and fell ; and out upon the green grass flowed his life's blood.

That pistol crack was but a passing intonation. The sun did not withdraw his beams, nor did the face of nature look the less fair that it had been so ruthlessly befouled. The chirruping of the little songsters was hushed for a moment, but only for a moment ; they went on with their twittering as if no evil had been consummated within earshot of their sweet voices. But none the less, the world was gone, for the Commendator of

Kilwinning. The summer suns henceforth were for others and not for him. The voices of nature were mute henceforward to his unresponsive ears. The stretching landscape, with its beautiful scenic beauties, was for others to gaze upon—no more for him. Life was no longer his portion. The feud was dead to him and he to the feud. For he slept with his fathers.

Sir Robert of Skelmorlie made haste to escape. He left Montgreenan behind him. He left the murdered Commendator growing cold on the grass; and, turning his horse's head towards Skelmorlie, he galloped away.

But gallop as he might there was a swifter steed than his behind him. Ride he never so fast, Nemesis rode at his heels. Skelmorlie Castle was strong as to its walls, heavy its gates and solid its doors, but Fate was more powerful than all the strength of Skelmorlie.

Inflamed to revenge by the death of his relative, the Laird of Stanely, Patrick Maxwell of Newark had sworn to accomplish the death of Sir Robert Montgomerie, and, having gathered a few of his friends around him, he left his Castle by the Clyde and travelled down into Ayrshire; and there, secreted by the friends of Glencairn, he waited opportunity to wreak his vengeance upon the Knight of Skelmorlie. And ere the summer had waned he had accomplished his errand and scored a double retribution.

It was Sir Robert Montgomerie's turn then. His raiding and his riding were alike at an end. It was for others to carry on the feud if they were so minded—for others to harry the homes of the Cuninghames, to cast covetous eyes on the possessions of the hereditary enemy, to haste on the prey. It was for others to maintain the honour of the name of Montgomerie. It was for another owner of the fair domain of Skelmorlie to look out upon the Clyde, with its panorama of changing beauties, with its white sails, with its white sea birds. It was for others to live; for him to die.

Patrick Maxwell of Newark smote heavily. He slaughtered

Sir Robert and his son and heir on the one fateful day. He lay in wait for them, as Sir Robert had done for the Commendator. Ready of hand, and of purpose, Sir Robert had striven to avert his doom; but the handwriting on the wall had gone forth against him. As he had done by others, so others had done by him, and he left the scene of his warring and his struggle. His son was with him when he fell; and his son fell too. The Maxwells had no time for sentiment. They cared not whether his son was innocent of complicity in the killing of their kinsman, or whether he had taken part in the series of retributive onslaughts on the homes and haunts of the Cuninghames. Enough for them that the Norman blood of the de Eglintons ran in his veins, and that they had sworn to vengeance because of the death of their relative who had dwelt by the braes of Gleniffer.

I could discuss the *morale* of these conflicts and killings, by the length of a summer's day. But to what purpose? Only, let the reader who would judge them look upon them not in the fierce white glare of the latter end of the nineteenth century, but in the less intense light of the years which were their Genesis. If they who offend outside the moral law are to be judged without law, then they who acted according to the light of the years wherein they lived, must be judged with a due regard to the circumstances which surrounded them. And let it be remembered that, for good or ill, these same men who carried on the feudal warfare were the men who shaped the destinies of the country in their day and generation, and that they could lay aside all their personal hates and jealousies when the needs or the honour of the nation required that her sons should present a united front to the common foe.

The days were dark for the Cuninghames, but now that the Maxwells had avenged them of one of the most vindictive of their foes, they took heart of grace. The Earl of Glencairn left the Court and repaired to Kilmaurs, and he reached his ancestral home surrounded by a strong body of his followers.

But he had not come to take up arms. He was ready to stand on the defensive if personally attacked ; but ere he had left the precincts of his Sovereign, the King had exacted from him a pledge that he would not have instant recourse to arms. His presence in Ayrshire was meant as a stimulus to his followers, and to prevent the Montgomeries from further united active prosecution of the feud.

In the Castle of Robertland, Gabriel Montgomerie, susceptible to every influence that tended towards the consummation of his designs, heard that the Earl of Glencairn was at Kilmaurs. The news inflamed him with a desire to strike one final effective blow at the head of the house of Cuninghame. What a stern revenge, and a glorious, it would be, were he to succeed in balancing the slaughter of one Earl with the slaughter of another, and wiping out in such fashion the deed by the Annick stream !

Yet was he afraid of the boldness of the sentiment, of the ambition that possessed him. It attracted him, it fascinated him, it drew him on ; but, pulling double in the other direction, was a sense of fear at the magnitude of the deed. The Earl of Glencairn was high in Court influence, a great peer and pillar of the State, the head of a powerful party in the kingdom. To bring about his death Gabriel felt was a noble ambition ; but what of the after consequences ?

Still, it could be done. The Cuninghames were raising their heads since the news had gone abroad that Sir Robert of Skelmorlie had been slain—was it not a duty to the cause of Montgomerie to change their rejoicing to sadness and to quench their hopes in a fresh despair ?

But what would King James say ? Gabriel knew enough to know that he would not regard such an event lightly, and that he would himself see to the obtaining of righteous satisfaction for the death of his favourite. And in that case was the simple deed of vengeance worth the risk that must be run ? Gabriel might do the deed—but what then ? Could he remain where he was ? Would he not have, rather, to cross the seas to escape

the avenger of blood that would speedily be on his track? And in that event was the premeditated act worth the consequences to himself? Was he called on to self-sacrifice?

Gabriel was sorely perplexed, and sought counsel. To whom should he go? He ought to have gone to the sage of Stane Castle, who, having put his aged hand to the plough, might not readily have counselled to looking back. He might have received the advice there which in his heart of hearts he desired to receive, but instead of turning towards the banks of the Irvine, he sought rather the house of Lainshaw and Sir Neill Montgomerie.

Lainshaw repelled him and attracted him by turns. Betimes he turned from his path to avoid even looking at its familiar grey walls; betimes he went out of his way merely to catch a glimpse of it among the trees. To-day he would have ridden a score of Scottish miles to have avoided it; to-morrow he would have ventured across another score of miles of moss-hag and mountain to see it. Gabriel knew these contradictions, but, try as he might, he could not remain consistent with himself. And that was because his heart was pulling one way and his judgment another; and it takes a stronger man than he to follow his judgment continually and consistently when his heart is pulling double in the contrary direction.

So he went to Lainshaw, and told himself he was a fool in that he went. He asked for Sir Neill Montgomerie, and Sir Neill gave him audience, and waited to hear what he had to say.

To do Gabriel Montgomerie justice, he was a straight-forward man and seldom beat about the bush. He had not political wisdom sufficient for that; therefore, when Sir Neill lent him ready hearing, he came with tolerable directness to the point.

"Did you hear, Sir Neill," he asked, "that the Earl of Glencairn was at Kilmaurs?"

"I heard that."

"What can have brought him to Ayrshire?"

"Really, Gabriel, I cannot say; but I do not think that the

Earl of Glencairn needs to seek excuse to visit his own home, least of all when the fortunes of his house are at rather a low ebb. No doubt he has come to study the position of things on the spot, and see if he cannot devise some means of undoing what has been done."

"That is what I feared, Sir Neill."

"Feared! Why should you fear? You have nothing to fear from the Earl of Glencairn. He will not set the heather a-fire in Ayrshire, if he set it a-fire at all, but at Perth, or Stirling, or Edinburgh, or wherever the Court is sitting."

"It is all the same, Sir Neill. He will set it on fire if he can, and what matters where the torch is applied? It is here the fire will burn."

"That may be, but wherein does that affect you personally?"

"I am not thinking about myself, Sir Neill. It cannot affect me much personally. I am not important enough in my own person to excite the Earl's ire; and, if I should, I can either hold my own or escape. The way is open; but we hold the position all over, and I am not afraid. The Cuninghames are too weak to seek us at home, and, as I say, if they seek us at all it will be at headquarters."

"So they may; but why should you so concern yourself about it?"

"Why, rather, should I not concern myself? What affects the Montgomeries as a family affects me as an individual. If Glencairn can strike a fatal blow at their power, no matter where it is struck, I will feel the effects of the blow with the remainder. If he succeed in undoing all that we have done with such labour and pains, all our work will have gone for nought."

"But, Gabriel, supposing that the Earl has simply come to make the best of existing circumstances—what then?"

"That I do not believe he has done. He stood aloof so long, that he must have a direct purpose in his repairing to Kilmaurs; and it is that direct purpose that troubles me. Now, if it could be undone at the outset!"

"Undone, Gabriel! What do you mean?"

"What I say. It could be undone."

"That may be, but I cannot see how either you or I can undo it. If it can be thwarted at all, the Master of Eglinton may be trusted to thwart it."

"I have no faith in scheming. I believe in direct effort, and I believe that we are in danger of losing all we have struggled to obtain. The murder of Sir Robert Montgomerie and his son is giving the Cuninghames fresh life and hope, and unless their strivings are checked in the bud, and that effectually, there is no saying where or in what they will eventuate."

"Sir Robert Montgomerie brought death upon his own head, Gabriel. He sought it and it came to him. He was ever too ready with his sword and his pistols. If he had left Maxwell of Stanely alone, he might have been alive to this day."

"Stanely was a friend of the Cuninghames, and an ally, and he deserved to die."

"And if he did deserve death at the hands of Sir Robert, did not Sir Robert, on the same shewing, merit death at the hands of Newark? Sir Robert, I say, was ever too hot-headed. He has done more harm by the killing of the Commendator of Kilwinning than can easily be undone. That deed has played the game of Glencairn, you may depend on it, better than Glencairn could have played it for himself; and Glencairn is the man who will know how to use it."

"Yes, if he have the chance. But I do not allow the deed was wrong or rashly done."

"That may be, Gabriel, but wrong and rashly done it was. It was a mistake, I say, that the Earl of Glencairn will know how to turn to account."

"Yes, I say, Sir Neill, if he have the chance."

"If he have the chance, Gabriel! What should deprive him of the chance? Who will rob him of so excellent an opportunity to retrieve the fortunes of his family?"

"I could, Sir Neill, and that is what I have come to consult you concerning."

"You do not mean that—"

"What did the Cuninghames do to the Earl of Eglinton?"

Sir Neill Montgomerie started to his feet. He had not suspected up to this point the real purport of the advice which Gabriel sought, and the very suggestion frightened him so that he stood aghast in its presence.

"Gabriel, Gabriel!" he ejaculated, "for God's sake seek no such counsel from me. I cannot give you it. In the name of Heaven, expel such an idea from your heart—its carrying out would be death to the hopes of the Montgomeries."

"But, Sir Neill, listen to what I have to say."

"I will not listen further, Gabriel. I have already heard too much. I will be no party to this—first or last. I will not listen to your suggestion. I will not connive at such a deed. I will not incriminate myself by even listening to another sentence you have to say."

"You have not listened at all as yet, Sir Neill," replied Gabriel, bluntly. "I tell you I came here for advice. I have not resolved on anything, and if your advice is that I should forbear, who knows whether I may not take it? So, sit down again, and let me hear what you have to say."

Sir Neill resumed his seat, and his composure at the same time.

"You say you have come here for advice, Gabriel," he said, "but ere I speak my mind freely, let me know exactly what it is you suggest."

"The Cuninghames slew the Earl of Eglinton. Was his life less precious than that of Glencairn? If it were meet that one Earl should die, why not another? and frankly, I have been thinking that if we can compass the death of Glencairn, we should strike a fatal blow at the very root of the house of Cuninghame. They would fain strike such a blow at the house of Montgomerie."

"I have heard what you suggest. I understand it, Gabriel, perfectly. You mean to kill the Earl?"

Gabriel nodded assent—matter of fact assent.

"You think," resumed Sir Neill, "that by accomplishing the death of the Earl of Glencairn you would strike a fatal blow at the house of Cuninghame! At the house of Montgomerie, rather. Your course would be suicidal. It would be suicidal for yourself, for the king would never pardon you. At the very best you would be a fugitive for the rest of your days; and would the memory of revenge be sufficient recompense for life-long banishment brought about to accomplish benefits that never could accrue to you? You think to stamp out the house of Glencairn? That can never be. You may as well think to destroy the father of the forest by lopping off the topmost bough, while all the while his roots are deep and far spreading in their native soil. Forbear, Gabriel, then, to try to accomplish impossibilities. Forbear to risk the whole family fame and fortune on such a rash undertaking. We have friends at court, but we have also enemies. Friends are not easily kept—enemies are easily multiplied—and your deed would stir the westland to its depths. Let be then, I implore you."

"I'll not promise," somewhat doggedly replied Gabriel, who saw he was driven into a corner, and who became obstinate in proportion as he was driven. "I'll not promise. I've thought of all that before. I've considered the undertaking in every possible light."

"Then why did you come to me at all?"

"Because I wanted your advice."

"Because you wanted my advice? No, but because you hoped I would give you the advice you were anxious to get. Because you thought, though Heaven only knows why you ever thought it, I was as rash as yourself. But I don't want to recriminate, Gabriel, and I am sure that in your calmer moments you will see the wisdom of what I have said."

"Well, I'll think over it, but I'll promise you nothing. There isn't such a chance thrown in our road every day."

"No, perhaps not; nor has the devil such a temptation to throw in your path either, every day. You must think, Gabriel, think seriously of what I have said; and if you only do, you'll give up the mad enterprise."

"There's no madness in it," growled Gabriel.

CHAPTER XVII.

A STERN ALTERNATIVE AND A CONSEQUENT WARNING.

SIR NEILL was sorely exercised in his mind concerning the communication made to him by Gabriel Montgomerie. He hoped for the best. He trusted that Gabriel would consider, in the quiet of Robertland, and consider seriously, the counsel which he had given him. But on the other hand he knew Gabriel's tenacity of purpose and obstinacy when dominated by his passions, and he feared, lest, carried away by these, he should endeavour at his own instance to bring about the death of the Earl of Glencairn.

He thought of warning the Earl, but that he could not do directly. He thought of riding across to Robertland and again urging upon Gabriel the duty of refraining from further quest for vengeance; but he was afraid lest Gabriel should be thereby hardened in his resolve. Yet still he was resolved to leave no duty undone. If he could prevent it, Gabriel must not go forth to slay the Earl, must not even lie in wait for him; and if, despite his efforts, the hot-headed impetuous feudalism should insist on the course which he had suggested for himself, he must put the Earl of Glencairn on his guard against the danger that threatened him.

But ere taking this latter course he must bring further pressure to bear on Gabriel himself. By what means? By what means better and more effectively than the aid of his daughter Anna. Sir Neill was not quite blind to the fact that Gabriel was drawn towards Anna by ties closer than those of outlying relationship, and he knew that Anna would not refuse to interpose her advice to prevent such a terrible misfortune as that which would necessarily be involved in the slaying of the Earl of Glencairn.

So he took Anna into his confidence; and though she instinctively shrank from the exercising of her influence upon Gabriel, knowing how such intervention was certain to be misunderstood, she laid her disinclination to rest and herself sent invitation to Robertland, which, when Gabriel Montgomerie received, he marvelled greatly, yet nevertheless mounted his horse and took his way to Lainshaw.

He was admitted by the new butler, upon whom he scowled because he represented a decadence in the feudal sympathies of the household, and was conducted straightway to the dining-room, where Anna speedily joined him. Though the interview was of her seeking, she was not a whit more effusive than formerly, but quiet and self-possessed and as placid as the waters of a pond, and as deep, too, as the still waters, run they never so smoothly.

"I have sent for you, Gabriel," she began, "in consequence of a communication which my father has made to me concerning an attempt which he says you are meditating upon the life of the Earl of Glencairn."

"I had not thought that your father would have made any communication to you on the matter. Such affairs are not for women, but for men."

"Right is right, Gabriel, and a woman is as much bound to stand by the right as a man. It is men who execute, but women who suffer; and therefore, if for no other than selfish reasons, it is my duty to confer with you regarding your project."

"The conference is premature then, Anna, for I have resolved

upon nothing. I have only considered the possibility of the matter—it has but come to me as an inspiration—I have not yet projected the carrying of it out.”

“The conference would be too late if you had so resolved—for if once your purpose was taken and your mind made up to the deed, argument and reason would come too late. And therefore, what I have to say to you I must say now.”

“Very well, Anna, I am here to listen to what you have to say. I am here to be convinced, if you can convince me, that the course I have suggested—and only suggested, not resolved upon—would be hurtful to the weal of the Montgomeries.”

“Then tell me, in the first place, what it is you would expect to gain were you to succeed in bringing about the death of the Earl of Glencairn?”

“I would expect, first and foremost, to balance the murder of the Earl of Eglinton; second, to destroy at once and for ever the power of the Cuninghames in Ayrshire; and then to make the house of Eglinton so powerful that its very strength would obtain the respect and the consideration in his dealings with it, of the Sovereign.”

“That is to say, Gabriel, you intend to make murder atone for murder?”

“I did not say so. The killing of the Earl of Glencairn would be no murder, but an act of righteous retribution.”

“I have used your own words, Gabriel—you said you expected to balance the murder of the Earl of Eglinton. What was murder in the one instance could hardly be less than murder in the other. What you cannot condone when done by the Cuninghames, you regard as righteous retribution when done by the Montgomeries. But, Gabriel, murder is murder whenever and wherever it is committed.”

“But no murder, if the killing be a necessity.”

“It may be lawful to remove a tyrant, Gabriel, if the regular course of the law neither can nor will do it; but the Earl of Glencairn is no tyrant, and your ambition in slaying him is not

to further the weal of the country-side, but the welfare and the personal advancement of the house of Eglinton."

"If Glencairn is plotting against us, he is laying up mischief and trouble for us in the future, and if I can obviate that mischief and trouble is it not my duty to do so?"

"No, you are not a constituted minister of justice. At best you are but an avenger of blood, and you are about to avenge the blood of one slaughtered man upon another who had nothing to do with the slaughter, and whom only accident has constituted the head of the house to which the manslayers belonged. One deed of blood can never balance another in the scales of heaven, and no moral guilt accruing to the Cuninghames can lighten, or could lighten, by one single grain, the guilt that would of necessity attach itself to you were your projected undertaking to be consummated."

"Not projected undertaking, Anna. It is nothing save a suggestion as yet, and may come to nothing."

"A suggestion in your mind, Gabriel, is perilously near premeditation. You expect, you say, in the second place to destroy at once and for ever the power of the Cuninghames in Ayrshire. You expect to achieve an impossibility. The Earl of Glencairn dead, the earldom would still survive. Another Earl would step into his place; and instead of quietly using his influence at Court, as the present Earl is doing, to bring about a peaceful issue, he might call his friends to his aid and meet retaliation with retaliation. Do not think that the Montgomeries are to hold undisputed possession of North Ayrshire. The Cuninghames are strong, and if they but give the signal, the Maxwells of Renfrewshire and the Kennedys of Carrick will come to their aid; and instead of your accomplishing the annihilation of the family of Glencairn, you are more likely to bring about the downfall of Eglinton."

"No, Anna. The stronger and more powerful a house is, the more it is respected and regarded. It is not the strong who are punished in these days, but the weak."

"Save when the strength of the strong constitutes a danger to the country or to the power of the sovereign. The King is jealous of domination in the hands of private families, and he will see to it that the Cuninghames are maintained as a bulwark against the power of the Montgomeries. And that seems to me to apply to your third reason. You are grasping at the shadow of omnipotence in North Ayrshire and risking the loss of the substance of strength."

"I cannot agree with you, Anna. The King is only too thankful to see those private feuds at an end, no matter by whom or by what means they are brought to a close. Were the house of Eglinton in undisputed possession and supremacy, he would regard it as the best security he could have for permanent peace and tranquility in North Ayrshire. And as for the checks that you interpose—the Kennedys and the Maxwells—the Kennedys have their hands sufficiently occupied in cutting one another's throats, and the Maxwells could not alone risk themselves in combat with the Montgomeries. The greater our strength is, the greater it will become, if it be handled but wisely and warily."

"Even were these things so, Gabriel, at best you would do evil that good may come?"

"That is a point for theologians and their hair-splitting—it does not concern me."

"But it should concern you, and it must concern you. You must bear your own responsibilities. You cannot get rid of them, you cannot throw them aside. And you will have to bear the weight of them, too. Do you think that the Master of Eglinton would condone such a deed? Would he not see the wisdom of washing his hands of it and leaving you to bear the brunt? Within ten days you would either be a prisoner in the Heart of Midlothian, or else, a fugitive from justice; you would be put to the horn."

"I have thought of these things."

"If you have, you must be convinced in your own mind that

you cannot do this deed and live ; or if you do live, that you cannot live at home. Has the experience of the Cuninghames no lessons for you? What has Aiket gained? Slain by the walls of his own castle. What has Clonbeith gained? Dragged from his hiding-place and cut to pieces. What have Robertland and Corsehill gained? Fugitives on the continent of Europe, outlaws, deprived of their lawful rights. What has Sir Robert Montgomerie gained? Sacrificed to the vengeance of the Maxwells, together with his son. What has the Commendator of Kilwinning gained, and he an innocent man? Shot by the gates of Montgreenan. Can you find no warnings in such a succession? And yet you calmly suggest a deed worse than any that has been done, and are prepared to accept consequences that your own friends, deserting you in the hour of your need, will haste to heap upon you ! You must consider this anew, Gabriel, else you are a ruined man. Can I say nothing to stay you in your infatuation ? ”

“ Yes, Anna, you can stay me if you are so resolved. ”

“ Stay you ! That is what I am trying to do. That is what I would give anything in this world to accomplish. ”

“ Anything ? ”

“ Yes, anything that I could give you. ”

“ Yourself, Anna ? ”

“ Gabriel ! ”

“ I am in earnest, Anna. Give me yourself and you may stay this, or any other enterprise. ”

“ And if I refuse ? ”

Gabriel shrugged his shoulders. The climax in the conversation had come so suddenly that neither Gabriel nor Anna had time to get flustered or flurried. The successive rejoinders had been spoken in rapid torrent of utterance, and were as firmly and as boldly spoken as if they had but formed part of the pleadings of the one, and the dogged, stilted defence of the other.

Yet, so far as Gabriel was concerned, there was the most intense earnestness. His whole demeanour—his voice, his look,

his gestures—all were earnestness itself. His climax was his ultimatum, and it was pronounced after such a fashion that it left no doubt on Anna's mind what the alternative was.

And Anna was earnest too, deeply, passionately earnest. She was so enwrapt in her pleadings that the sudden proposal of terms by Gabriel did not at first strike her as anything more than the natural continuation of the conversation.

But now that Gabriel shrugged his shoulders, there was a pause, and in that pause Anna read the full meaning of the declaration; and, woman-like, she became confused, and the deep flush of her earnestness changed into the blush of the maiden. Gabriel saw the change, but he was set on his course and resolved to push his ultimatum either to refusal or acceptance, and he waited calmly until Anna had mastered her temporary confusion and resumed her ordinarily calm demeanour.

"You cannot mean, Gabriel, that if I refuse your offer, you will wreak your vengeance upon the Earl of Glencairn?"

Gabriel said nothing. He shrugged his shoulders anew, and left Anna to be her own interpreter.

"Answer me, Gabriel," she resumed. "Is my hand the price of the Earl's life? Tell me that—let us have no subterfuge."

"I have not said so," doggedly replied Gabriel. "I have only said that you have his destiny in your own hands. You said you would give anything in the world to save his life. I bid you give yourself. I did not say that if you declined I should pursue my own course, to his destruction."

"I said I would give you anything that I had to give, but I cannot give you what you ask."

"Your hand is not yours to give?"

"Yes."

"Then I claim it on your own promise."

"You cannot have it."

"It is yours, you say. Why then cannot I have it?"

"Because it is not mine to give away to you. My hand belongs to my heart, and that, Gabriel, cannot be yours. When

that is given, it must be voluntarily bestowed, and I cannot voluntarily bestow it upon you."

"Then, Anna, upon you be the consequences."

"Gabriel Montgomerie, you cannot mean to say that the Earl of Glencairn's life is in that hand," and as Anna spoke she held up her right hand. "You cannot imply that if I refuse what I cannot give, you will take vengeance, merely because your feelings are wounded?"

"I have not said what the alternative may be. I do not know what it may be. But I shall hold myself free to take whatever course I may see fit. Am I to understand that you absolutely refuse my offer?"

"Absolutely. Let there be no doubt on that."

"In that case, Anna," replied Gabriel with affected coolness, "there is no need for further prolonging this interview."

"None whatever," returned Anna, "but before you go, let me entreat you to rise superior to this disappointment. Do not let it be said that, because a woman refused alliance with you, you rushed headlong to your destruction. Be more worthy of yourself, Gabriel, be more true to the right, and you will yet live to thank me that I have spoken to you honestly and fearlessly, and have chosen the path of duty rather than inflict a life long misery upon both of us for the gratification of a passing whim."

"It is no passing whim, Anna," rejoined Gabriel passionately, "and your heart must tell you otherwise. Could you not see that I was drawn hither to Lainshaw contrary to my better judgment? I should have remained at a distance. You told me so in inference, if not in word, and yet, like a silly bird, I must needs flutter into the net. But for you I should have bidden Lainshaw good-bye, and never darkened its doors with my shadow; and now you tell me that it is nothing more than a passing whim! But I go now, to return no more, and upon you rests the responsibility for the future."

"Not so, Gabriel. I have warned you as a friend. I have

acquitted myself of all responsibility, and you must reckon with the future for yourself."

"That is as it may be," rejoined Gabriel angrily, and without further remark he strode heavily from the room.

When Gabriel had gone, Anna sought her father and communicated the result of the interview. Sir Neill's brow darkened as he listened to the story, and when Anna had told all he was anew plunged in difficulty. What was he to do now? Let events take their course? Leave Gabriel alone, in the hope that he would exhaust his passion on himself and then return to thought and reason? Or, with the possibility in view of his still persevering in the project which had evidently taken deep root in his mind, acquaint the Earl of Glencairn with the danger?

There was only one point on which he had taken his resolve, and which, therefore, demanded no further consideration, and that was that the Earl of Glencairn must not be sacrificed to private vengeance. And yet, as a Montgomerie, he could not, and he would not, place Gabriel, hot-headed and unreasonable as he was, in personal danger.

In his dilemma he sought counsel of Anna, and Anna advised that a messenger should be sent to Kilmaurs, the residence of Glencairn, to warn the Earl of impending danger; and regarding the advice as good, he determined that the following day he should secretly despatch his butler, William Cuninghame, younger of Robertland, to convey the warning.

Accordingly, he called William that same night into the library, and there instructed him. The young laird of Robertland was by no means averse to undertaking the duty. The life he was leading, though a requisite of his safety, was irksome, and he longed to be up and away to the retrieving of the fortunes of the house of Cuninghame.

The following morning, clad in the homespun of the yeomen of the period, William set out for Kilmaurs. The day was bracing, and the young man felt unwonted exhilaration as, on the back of a good horse, he rode out into the open country.

The groundwork of his meditation was dark and saddening. Around him stretched the lands of his forefathers—theirs for centuries. Wherever he looked, the horizon was bounded by the woodland or the hillsides of the Cuninghames. Lainshaw was encircled by hostility. It was the home of the adjacent warden of the Montgomeries. All else was tributary to Glencairn. And yet, though his lands were far-stretching, and that beyond his ken, they nevertheless lay that summer day beneath the curse. Where were the men who had been wont to fight in the forefront of the Cuninghame's battle? Where were the smiling homesteads which he remembered while yet a boy? Where were the hamlets where peace should have reigned, and where the cottar should have dwelt? The land looked as if it had undergone invasion, as if a foreign foe, trampling as he came, had overrun it ruthlessly and with devastation in his train. It was only beginning to recover from the fatal raid of the Montgomeries, and the beginning was so initial that it was apologetic. The groundwork, I say, of William Cuninghame's meditations was dark and saddening.

And yet he felt exhilaration. It was his own country, his own landscape. Not his own, personally. But his own in the sense that it was the Cuninghames', and that he was a Cuninghame. The woodland, the flowing streams, the undulating pasture lands, the open country, the grey walls of the keeps and castles, were all his own. The past was the past. Dark enough and stormy in all conscience, was the past. And full of hope, and with the young blood of one who had the future to court, William Cuninghame chose rather to look to the future.

The past for those who had fallen victims to the raid directed from Eglinton. The past for those who had slept their last sleep by the walls of their castles or their cottages, or on the hillsides or in the fields. The past for those who had fled the scene as from the plague. The past for those who had to do with the past.

The future for the men of the future, with something to live

for, with something to hope for, with resolve in their breasts, with revenge in their thoughts. The future for those who turned to the rising sun, their backs to the westward, where the luminary dipped when it was evening.

William Cuninghame waited on the future. He knew not what its eventualities might be, but he felt they were better than its portents. He felt that he was passing through the dark hour that precedes the dawn, and that the breaking day was assured. And so, burying the past as he could, he looked forward, and was exhilarated as he looked.

The few miles that lay between Lainshaw and Kilmaurs—for there is no wealth of far mileage between these hoary ruins or these grey walls in this westland—were rapidly passed, and the stronghold of the Earl of Glencairn was in view. The rider went unchallenged right up to the gates of Kilmaurs, and the warder learning that he desired to speak with the Earl, was willing and ready to receive him. The business, William had told the warder, was of the utmost importance, and he waited patiently, standing by the head of his horse until he should receive an answer.

His eye roamed over the castle, a strong hold for the day of trouble. Thick were its walls, and heavy its battlements. Around it stretched a fair and goodly park, hoary with woodland, and, pleasantly rippling, the Carmel burn ran past, rushing on in its never ceasing journey. The rivulet still flows. "Unstable as water!"

Unstable and all as water may be, this same little burn remains to this day. The fair park is gone, and the monarchs of the glade, and the heavy walls and buttresses of Kilmaurs have so disappeared, even to their foundations, that the very site of the dwelling is matter for surmise. Two hundred and fifty years ago the castle existed in all its glory, but the fingers of time have touched it so ruthlessly that it has gone like a tale that is told. And yet for full five hundred years the Cuninghames dwelt in it.

It is tempting thus to digress, but the Earl of Glencairn did not do William Cuninghame the injustice of keeping him without long enough to sanction his falling into the moralising mood. On the contrary he bade the warder usher him into his presence at once; and, clad in the rude homespun, the young laird of Robertland did obeisance to his chief, Alexander, the fifth Earl of Glencairn, "the good Earl," courtier, politician, statesman, reformer.

"You have asked to see me on business of importance?" the Earl said to William Cuninghame, eyeing him sharply.

"I have, my lord," replied William. "I have come hither as a messenger from Sir Neill Montgomerie of Lainshaw."

"Sir Neill Montgomerie!"

"Yes, your lordship will remember that it was his wife, Lady Elizabeth—?"

"A curse upon her," muttered the Earl, interrupting the close of the sentence. "Yes, yes, I know, I know," he continued, speaking sharply, "never mind that—what of Sir Neill Montgomerie himself, and his message?"

"I hope your lordship will permit me to say that Sir Neill has not in any way taken part with the Montgomeries in this raid upon your lordship's lands, and the sympathies of his family are less pronounced for the house of their father than for that of their mother. Had that not been so, I had not been here."

"Perhaps not, but that remains to be seen. Your message?" returned the Earl impatiently.

"Will you permit me further to say, in proof of what I have already said, that though clad as I am in the attire of the peasantry, I am the eldest son of Cuninghame of Robertland, and that I am living secretly, and thus in disguise, under the protection of Sir Neill Montgomerie, my uncle."

"You a son of Robertland, and living with Sir Neill Montgomerie! That requires explanation."

"I have no further explanation to offer than that Sir Neill is my uncle by marriage, and that when I returned to Ayrshire

from the Continent of Europe in the early summer, he permitted me to assume the position of butler in Lainshaw; and in that capacity I am waiting until a brighter day dawns."

"I hope that won't be long," remarked the Earl. "Sir Neill," he continued, "has shown you great consideration and involved himself in no little risk. But it is a risk that may pay him some day, when the Cuninghames come to their own. You will convey to Sir Neill my thanks for his kindness—and now for his message!"

"Sir Neill has reason to believe—indeed, to know—that danger exists towards your lordship personally, and he has bid me warn you not to go abroad alone or unattended."

"Danger, did you say? From the Montgomeries, I presume?"

"Yes, from the Montgomeries."

"From whom?"

"Sir Neill did not say from whom."

"Have you any idea, yourself?"

"I have, my lord, but you will understand that I do not desire to convey further information than that I am instructed to give. Naturally, Sir Neill has no desire to personally involve himself in communicating more information to your lordship than he considers absolutely necessary."

"But that does not concern you. You can have no motive for maintaining reticence."

"Pardon me, my lord. I owe so much to Sir Neill Montgomerie that I am bound to respect his scruples."

"That is true, and I will not insist. You will convey to Sir Neill the assurance of my high respect and my warmest thanks for his kindness. I cannot believe that the warning has been given unnecessarily."

"It has not, my lord, believe me. The danger may be imminent, and I hope you will not neglect the warning."

"I will not. What of Lady Elizabeth?"

"She is in life and in health."

"Where?"

"I cannot say, my lord."

"You know?"

"I have reason to believe, but I am under a solemn promise not to reveal."

"Enough."

The Earl of Glencairn did not further prolong the brief interview, but, shaking William Cuninghame warmly by the hand, dismissed him without further remark.

CHAPTER XVIII.

GABRIEL MONTGOMERIE ON A FRESH QUEST.

IN the quiet of Robertland Gabriel Montgomerie nursed his wrath. No one knew better than he that there was a tremendous risk involved even in attempting to kill the Earl of Glencairn. In his heart of hearts he felt it would be a mistake; and yet the project possessed him, haunted him, dogged his footsteps. He could not drive it out, or away. His vanity was wounded, and he must have revenge for the wound. Upon whom? Not upon Anna Montgomerie, not upon her father—not directly at all events. He must strike them without striking them directly. He must show that he had a mind of his own, that he was above their advice, and that he was able to shape his own course and mould his own destiny. To slay the Earl of Glencairn might involve, certainly would involve, momentous issues; these issues would, to equal certainty, react upon himself, and at the very least drive him hence from the country, and from social aspiration and individual hope; but at the same time they would launch a bolt upon Lainshaw that could not fail to strike. And at the very least, he would have his spite out upon Anna and her father.

But chiefly upon Anna. It was she who might, had she so willed it, have driven his stars in their courses. She had held his destiny, his future, in her hand. She had been offered the moulding of his way. She had refused the offer, flung it back at him without hesitation, and left him free to act as his leanings and his passions should hereafter direct him. And, therefore, the faults of the future must lie with her. With one simple word she could have stayed all his wild projects, half-simmering in his mind, but that one simple word she had not spoken.

So it was that Gabriel rode restlessly across the country, sometimes alone, sometimes with his men behind him. Alone, he was the victim of his passions, and in the depths of his mind he devised enterprises and evolved passions that should for ever have slumbered. He pictured to himself the execution of projects that found birth only in the darkness of his soul, and found a gloomy satisfaction in picturing what their effect would be upon the dwellers in Lainshaw. Attended by his men he was less dangerous. Surrounded by human life, the inhuman ghouls of the darkened understanding were for the moment driven out, and, though he longed for action he never seriously contemplated the carrying out of the projects which dominated him when he had no one to whom to talk.

Betimes he rode away across the uplands to the borders of Renfrewshire ; betimes he swept past Lainshaw and held southwards to where the Castle of Kilmaurs stood amidst the woodland and the quiet. Kilmaurs had a fascination for him. In it was the Earl of Glencairn. The Earl was the chief subject of his thoughts, and he could not keep away from the grey walls that guaranteed the Earl's safety so long as he remained within their friendly embrace.

If the Earl had but come forth alone, or with one or two followers at his back, Gabriel would in all probability have attempted the deed for the consummation of which the devil was gnawing at his heart-strings. If Glencairn had but given him the ghost of an excuse for the unsheathing of sword or the drawing

of pistol, the sword would inevitably have been bared and the pistol drawn. But only once, notwithstanding that he lay in wait, did he catch sight of the chief of the Cuninghames.

Ever since the Earl of Glencairn had received warning of the possible danger impending, he had provided against emergencies. The Castle was strong, and, shielded by its ramparts and its buttresses, there was nought to fear ; and when Glencairn went abroad across the lands that were all his own, he was attended by a sufficient body of his followers to render sudden surprise impossible of success. The ways that led to Kilmaurs were all watched, and no large body of Montgomeries could have passed the keen-eyed watchmen who looked out for their coming.

Impelled in his course by feelings of which he had lost control, Gabriel had, with a score of his men, ridden as far as the environs of Kilmaurs, with what object, for what intent, he could not himself have declared. He was there a waiter upon the future, upon the evolution of his chance. Seen by one of the followers of Glencairn, word was conveyed to Kilmaurs of his presence, and forthwith from the gateway of the keep there rode out a strong party of the Cuninghames, with their chief himself at their head.

Now, surely, was Gabriel's opportunity to reach the heart of Glencairn? Not so. No sooner had the stout array of the Cuninghames, numerically far superior to that of the Montgomeries, come in view, advancing to the combat, than Gabriel shunned the unequal fight and drew rein for Robertland. There was a clattering of horse hoofs ; there was racing and chasing ; there were cries of challenge on the one hand, met with silence on the other ; the miles slipped away beneath the chase, and ere the confines of Robertland were reached, the Cuninghames gave up the pursuit and leisurely returned to Kilmaurs.

Gabriel did not thenceforward affect the dangerous haunts of Glencairn, and, left to himself anew, he must needs turn his thoughts to another enterprise. The Earl was on the out-look,

and he was not to be entrapped, as the Earl of Eglinton had been, far from the strong arms of his henchmen.

What was Gabriel to do now? Fate was not long in giving him reply.

The Eglinton family, with every other family of distinction in Scotland at that period, was in touch with the Court of France. It had its representatives, if not emissaries, at that centre of danger to the peace and the liberties of this country, and from one of these the Master of Eglinton had learned that the young laird of Robertland had left Paris for Scotland. The Master of Eglinton had traced him as far as London, whence he had taken journey for the north, and conceiving that he had turned his steps towards the seat of his lawful and rightful patrimony, he despatched a messenger to Gabriel warning him of possible danger, and instructing him to be on the outlook for William Cuninghame.

That was an undertaking to Gabriel's mind. He had already begun to look upon Robertland as his own. For nine months he had been its warder. His was the castle while the seasons revolved. No man over all the lands of Robertland could gainsay his right to go where he listed and do what he thought right. He exercised his domain unchallenged, and he had begun to look forward to the time when ownership by the strong hand should give place to personal proprietary rights. And so, when he heard that William Cuninghame was in Scotland, and in hiding, he divined that he must of necessity be not far away from Robertland. The Earl of Glencairn might live a while for aught that concerned him ; he had more important work on hand.

Gabriel had never seen William Cuninghame, younger of Robertland, and had no idea what he was like. The general cast of the Cuninghame features he knew well, and he concluded that William must necessarily resemble his friends ; but whether he was short or tall, stout or slim, fair or dark, he did not know. Before he could hope to discover him, were he in hiding in

these parts, he must clearly have a rough idea of the man for whom he was looking.

He therefore applied to the Master of Eglinton to secure for him a description of the young laird, and he waited patiently until that should arrive. Meanwhile he turned the current of his thoughts towards the same young laird ; and inasmuch as Gabriel's mind could not permit of two strong currents at one and the same time, the new stream, which set towards the obstacle that stood between him and the lands of Robertland, soon ran so strong and deep, that the current which had swept so swiftly towards Kilmaurs by degrees dried up. Whether it should ever flow anew in its course was for events to determine.

At length the necessary description arrived, and armed therewith, Gabriel set about his quest. He was lynx-eyed in the search. Anew and again he ransacked the country. He was the terror of the peasantry who had struggled back towards their holdings. The farmers who were re-roofing as much of their dwellings as would give them shelter from the elements, and cultivating as much of their farms as would afford them sustenance, never knew when he would pounce on them, and ransack their homesteads, as if for hidden treasure. The deserted castles of the Cuninghames he rambled over, in all their nooks and recesses ; and every stranger whom he met on the highways or byeways he scanned suspiciously.

Engaged thus in his search, he encountered Sir Neill Montgomerie, who, advancing, addressed him pleasantly—

"You have quite deserted us, Gabriel," said Sir Neill. "Lainshaw has all but forgotten what you are like."

"It matters little," replied Gabriel, "for I have all but forgotten what Lainshaw is like."

"Then it is your own fault, for Lainshaw is as hospitable as ever it was."

"Hospitable to whom? Not to me. Hospitable, I doubt not, to the Cuninghames or their sympathisers, but not hospit-

able to any one who regards the weal of Eglinton of greater moment than that of Glencairn."

"You do Lainshaw injustice, Gabriel. I am as true a Montgomerie as ever you were. We differ, not in our desire to promote the welfare or the advancement of the house of Montgomerie, but in our methods of doing it. You think that it should be founded on the ruins of Glencairn; I think there is room, and to spare, in Ayrshire for both to flourish together.

"And we are never likely to agree on that point, Sir Neill. I believe that the Earl of Glencairn is plotting for our downfall, as the Cuninghames have ever done, and that we ought, therefore, to treat them as they would treat us."

"There you are mistaken. But let that pass. We can agree to differ, Gabriel, if we cannot differ to agree. And I will not deny you the hospitality of Lainshaw because we have chosen different paths towards the same goal."

"That is not all, Sir Neill, as you know. I cannot return to Lainshaw after—" and Gabriel paused.

"After what passed between you and Anna," said Sir Neill finishing the sentence. "Anna told me that you had done her the honour of offering her your hand, and that she had declined it. But that is no reason why you should give us the cold shoulder. Why should the strong will of a young woman with a mind of her own, interpose such a barrier between us?"

"Why, rather, should it not prove an effectual barrier? I could forgive her her refusal but for the manner in which the refusal was spoken; and that I cannot forget."

"Never mind that, Gabriel, you are not the first man who has met with a disappointment in life, and who has overcome it too, and lived it down. And, besides, if Anna's story be true, you were not over winsome in your wooing."

"I had no time to be winsome, but I was in earnest, and that is more to the point. I was never born to play the cavalier. Life has been rough and ready for me all my days, and I have not cultivated the fine art of love-making."

"Then you ought the more to take your disappointment like a man, and live down the disappointment. Once resolve to live it down, and the thing is done."

"It can never be so with me, I fear. I am too rugged and unsophisticated for that. When I am hit hard, I am hit hard. I am like the oak that grows wild in its strength, and refuses to yield itself to the graces of cultured shape and symmetry."

"Well then, if you are, Gabriel, remember that the oak forgets the winter storms and the snows when the spring time comes, and that it yields to the soft rains and the suns of the summer."

Gabriel shook his head. "I cannot pursue the metaphor, Sir Neill, and when last I left Lainshaw, I told Anna I could never return. She alone can bring me back, and she is not likely to do it. Besides, I have no time to try to unroll the past; the present and the future are what concern me. You say, Sir Neill, you are as much a Montgomerie as I?"

"I say so, and I defy either you or any other Montgomerie to give me honest contradiction."

"Then I think I can elicit sympathy in my new quest."

"That depends on the nature of the quest."

"You are all for reservations, Sir Neill. I doubt whether I can obtain your sympathy for anything that concerns the welfare of Eglinton."

"I am all, I say, for the advancement of Eglinton, so long as its advancement is honestly and righteously gone about. But I am for no further blood-letting, Gabriel. Not one more ounce of blood would I spill, save in self-defence. We are drenched too deeply in gore as it is."

"I thought as much, Sir Neill. You are all for sentiment, and nothing at all for action."

"You forget how I have suffered from what you call action, and how I shall continue to suffer until the day I die. Action has been my curse."

"Inaction is mine. I cannot bear to sit down and do nothing.

But after what you have said, it can do little good that I should make known to you the enterprise on which I am engaged."

"That is for yourself to determine, and yourself alone. I do not seek your confidence, and, if you give me it, you must give me it willingly and without any solicitation on my part."

Gabriel paused in the conversation and there was a brief silence. He was weighing the matter in his mind. Would he tell Sir Neill of the young laird of Robertland and his search for him, or would he retain his secret? Or would he pursue a middle course and endeavour to turn Sir Neill's knowledge to account? Gabriel never was long in making up his mind. And he had not sufficient control of his thoughts to withhold from Sir Neill that which was uppermost in them.

"Where is Cuninghame of Robertland?" at length he asked, somewhat abruptly.

"In Denmark, I believe," Sir Neill replied, "but of that I am uncertain. I only repeat the common rumour of the country-side."

"Yes, in Denmark. His son—where is he?"

Sir Neill started and looked scrutinisingly at the questioner. What did he know? Did he know all? Or was he merely questioning at hap-hazard?

"His son?" he repeated, "Where is he, you ask?"

"Yes, where is he?"

"That I cannot say—but why do you enquire?"

"I'll perhaps tell you that bye-and-bye; it is his whereabouts I am anxious at this moment to learn, and I would give a good deal to know."

"Why should you concern yourself with his whereabouts? He has had nothing to do with these troubles. He has been no party to the feud. He was not even in the country when the Earl of Eglinton was slain."

"That may be, Sir Neill, but he stands in my path and I must sweep him out of it. This is no matter for sentiment, Sir Neill. It is a case of self-preservation in the first place, and

self-interest in the second. Should he think to regain that from which his father has been driven out, it will be at me that he will strike the blow; and, should he regain the possession of Robertland, farewell to the hopes of adding it to the lands of Eglinton or to the possessions of Hazelhead."

"Is that where the shoe pinches, Gabriel?" returned Sir Neill, shaking his head. "It would be a waste of time to give you advice; you will take your own course here."

"I will. I want no advice. The most I thought I might possibly secure was your sympathy, and that you deny me. But perhaps you can tell me this—you knew William Cuninghame as a youth, before he left Ayrshire—What was he like?"

"He was but a slim, growing lad when he left, and I hardly remember what he was like then. But you do not expect to find him here?"

"Where else, Sir Neill?"

"Is he going to put his head within the jaws of the lion?"

"Has he not returned so that he may regain his father's lands? Where else is he to be found than where his father's lands are found?"

"True. Have you sought for him?"

"Wherever I thought he might be concealed."

"And found no trace of him?"

"None."

"Then you have yourself put him on the scent of danger. If he is concealed hereabouts, he is certain to have heard you are looking for him. And if he has not heard it already, he will to a surety hear it, if you thus openly pursue your search."

"I might have taken it for granted that you would throw cold water on the pursuit and on my hopes, Sir Neill; but even if you correctly deduce, and he flee the district, am I not advantaged by his going?"

"I had not thought of it in that light, Gabriel, and certainly, if you can gain your end by such means I shall not find fault

with the result. Have you obtained any trace of William Cuninghame?"

"None whatever."

"You might let me know when you find him—and where?"

"I will, though it will be to no purpose so far as I am concerned."

"One never knows these things, Gabriel. If you could see the end from the beginning you might think differently, and even come to see that the darkness of the night was necessary to the brightness of the dawning. Short cuts are seldom the best, and a worthy object is rarely attained saved by diligence and perseverance continued over a long period. But you have not told me yet whether we may look for you at Lainshaw?"

"Not until I change my mind," retorted Gabriel, abruptly closing the interview.

When Sir Neill was in a difficulty he turned to one of his advisers—his daughter, Anna, or Captain Stewart of Ochiltree—and to each of these he now turned.

"What is to be done now?" he asked Anna. "It looks as if we were to exist for no other purpose than to check the plans of Gabriel."

"And if we do," rejoined Anna, "it is not an unworthy destiny when Gabriel's plans are dangerous and stand in need of being thwarted."

"I feel," said Sir Neill, "that there is something not quite straightforward in accepting Gabriel's confidences and then undermining his projects."

"You have not sought his confidence. He comes to you because he cannot keep his own counsel. It is a good thing, too, he cannot, and for my part I see nothing either crooked or devious in hearing what he has to say and then acting on the dictates of duty."

"I suppose you are right, Anna. But what is to be done?"

"That is a more difficult question. The best course, probably, will be to do nothing until things develope a little further. If

Gabriel discovers that William Cuninghame is under this roof, you will not be long in learning of the discovery ; and then we can send him away."

"If it be not too late."

"We must take care that it be not too late. Gabriel as yet has no suspicions, save that he is all suspicion ; and as he has shut himself out from Lainshaw and declines to return to it, the danger of discovery is not by any means imminent."

"But what is to prevent him obtaining a description of William ? Those who supplied the information that has set Gabriel by the ears can also give him all the information that he requires."

"I did not think of that, father. There is greater danger than I at first surmised, but not greater, as yet, than we can risk."

"I'm not so sure of that, Anna, and I have no mind to involve myself in further trouble. My burden is heavy enough to bear as it is. I have lost my wife and the friendship of those with whom I am allied in the ties of relationship. These shun Lainshaw as they would the plague, and I have no mind to court reprisal any further at the hands of the Master of Eglinton and his associates. Least of all would I risk coming into active contact with such a hair-brained individual as Gabriel Montgomerie. He would glory in getting us into trouble."

"Yes, Gabriel is spiteful, if he is anything at all, and as he fancies he has a grievance against me, and against you too, there is no saying what he might do were he to discover William's whereabouts. But, nevertheless, father, I am not alarmed just yet. William must not be allowed to risk discovery any further than is absolutely necessary, and we can send him away if we see anything suspicious in Gabriel's movements. We'll see that to a certainty, because Gabriel never could work in the dark."

"True, Anna, but it is the very discovery that alarms me. It is ~~not the immediate~~ consequences that I am so much afraid of,

as the ulterior. We might easily enough get rid of William ere Gabriel could secure him, but once it became known that we had afforded him a refuge, it would be assumed, and that without reason, that we are more sympathetic towards the Cuninghames than we are towards the Montgomeries, and in these days we must walk warily."

"Yes, but we must not refuse to do what is right because the doing of it may involve consequences that may be distasteful to us."

"Not distasteful, Anna, but fatal. It is all very well to try to hold the balance even, but it is a very different thing to hold it to our own hurt when we have no special occasion to hold it at all. And now that the Montgomeries have set their hearts on securing a slice of the lands of the Cuninghames, they will take it all the worse that, from a feeling of mere sentiment, we are thwarting them in their intention. William must go, Anna."

"Go! father? Go where?"

"Wherever he likes, but he cannot remain in Lainshaw. The risk is too great."

"If there were no risk in doing what was right, there would be no credit in it."

"Yes, Anna, but the risk is all on the one side. William can go south again, if he cannot remain in Ayrshire. The world is wide; he is a young man; he is able to push his fortune; and he can do as many a better man than he has done, take his life in his hand and win fame and bread with his sword."

"Bye and bye it may come to that, but it has not come yet. We must not, at any rate, do anything rash."

"Well, I shall do nothing until I have conferred with Captain Stewart, and I shall do that without loss of time. I shall ride across to Ochiltree to-morrow and place the matter before him, and I shall act as he advises."

What advice could Captain Stewart give Sir Neill Montgomerie save that which Sir Neill himself desiderated? In the quiet of Ochiltree the friends discussed the matter in all its bearings.

Captain Stewart had no sympathy with sentiment. He could see no reason why Sir Neill should incur any risk for merely chivalrous reasons, and his counsel strengthened Sir Neill in the resolve to insist on the young laird of Robertland seeking other quarters.

CHAPTER XIX.

WILLIAM CUNINGHAME GOES FORTH FROM LAINSHAW.

"IT is no use saying anything more, Anna. I have considered the matter in all its bearings, and I have taken the advice of Captain Stewart, and the result of it all is, that I am resolved to bid William seek safety elsewhere. We cannot any longer involve ourselves for his sake."

"Very well, father, I presume there is no need that I should say anything further. And yet, your proposed course of action disappoints me."

"That may be, though why it should is more than I can tell. You are as well aware as I am that William's stay is a danger to us. It is not absolutely necessary for his own safety that he should remain at Lainshaw, and it is absolutely necessary for ours that he should not."

"I was in hopes, father, that you would pursue a course of strength and not of weakness. Why should you be afraid? Why should you knuckle under to Gabriel Montgomerie?"

"What would you have me do, then?"

"Set him at defiance. Treat him as he deserves to be treated. On no account take blame to yourself. I do not mean that you should flaunt William in his face and boast that you will keep him here despite all that the Montgomeries can do to prevent it. But now, if he discover that William has been here, and that

you have sent him about his business, he will not regard his sending away as any virtue on your part, and he will certainly look upon it as a sign of weakness ; whereas if you simply ignore him and do your duty, he cannot interpret it otherwise, save as of strength."

"It is not Gabriel alone that we have to deal with. Gabriel is but the representative of others more powerful than he ; and if I sacrifice the friendship of the Montgomeries, I am left alone. That I am a Montgomerie myself is sufficient to condemn me in the eyes of the Cuninghames ; and that the whole trouble which we are trying to avert and to escape has sprung largely from Lainshaw, is not likely, either, to be forgotten by those who have suffered most from it. We are between two fires."

"No. Where you see weakness in our position, father, I see strength. It has never been known in the history of the Montgomeries that they have turned their hand against their own household. They will never molest you. And can you think for a moment that the Cuninghames will turn their vengeance upon you ? You have served the Earl of Glencairn himself, and that will never be forgotten."

"That is true, but nevertheless I am the least able of all the Montgomeries to stand alone. Lainshaw is surrounded by Cuninghames. It is the place where their vengeance would first alight were reprisal intended. And if I lose the support of the Master of Eglinton, I am at their mercy. Remember, too, Anna, that I have no intention of currying favour with the Cuninghames. Born a Montgomerie, I shall die a Montgomerie, and therefore I am not going to risk the loss of their friendship. What have I to gain by continuing to give William a sanctuary ?"

"The consciousness of having done what is right."

"The consciousness of having done what is right ! That is no compensation. We are inflicting no hardship on William by sending him away. He will receive refuge at Kilmaurs if he choose to ask it ; and if he do not, why, the world is open to

him, and he has sufficient influence to enable him to push his way either at Copenhagen or at Paris."

"What I fear most, father, is the effect your action will have upon Gabriel. He will not fail to let you see that he regards himself as your master."

"Gabriel knows better than think he is any such thing; and if he does not, it will be my duty to teach him."

"Teach him! Why, the teaching of him will bring about the very thing you are most anxious to avoid, conflict with the Master of Eglinton. He is the Master's emissary, he is his deputy, and the Master will back him out, right or wrong, at all hazards."

"I am sorry, Anna, to have to set your opinion aside, but, for all you say, I cannot see that we are warranted in being, as we are now, in perpetual danger. Gabriel will discover who William is, depend on it. It will come to him as an inspiration some night. He has a description of the young laird of Robertland, and if he has not yet found him, it is simply because it has not occurred to him to look for him at Lainshaw; and when he starts to make the discovery, as he infallibly will, his first attack will be upon William himself, so that instead of securing his safety, we are involving him in risk, by keeping him a day longer under our roof. My mind is made up, Anna; he must go, and I must tell him so this very day."

"Whither is he to go, father? Have you thought of that?"

"No, he must go where he will. That is for himself to determine."

"After keeping him here so long, we are surely responsible to some extent for his future?"

"He is old enough to act for himself. One would think he was yet a child, to hear you speak, Anna. And if I must say it, it is not good for himself that he should remain here. He ought to be out in the world. If he ever means to come by his own, he is more likely to fit himself by encountering the rough, manly side of life than by waiting behind the chairs at the dinner table

of Lainshaw. And for his own sake, therefore, as well as for ours, he must go. Let that settle it, Anna."

Anna accepted the inevitable, and the interview closed. Sir Neill was dissatisfied with her insistence, and so, I confess, am I; but to discover the reason for it, it is necessary to step forward an hour or two, until the day is darkening towards the nightfall, and Sir Neill has inflexibly made his unwelcome communication.

The sun was setting, and from one of the deep set windows of Lainshaw, two alternately silent and alternately talkative individuals were ostensibly watching its going down. There is something softening, ameliorating, in the evening hour. It is transient, as all hours are, but it seems exceptionally transient in so far as it is the narrow border line between the day that is gone, and the night that is coming on. It begins the moment the charioteer drives the orb of day below the horizon, and it terminates when the stars come through the blue. It fades away from the afterglow of the sunset, through the gradually lessening glories of the sunset tints, until not one fleecy cloud, however far up in the sky or however gauzy in its texture, can catch one errant beam from the giver of its once burnished beauty; until these same gossamer clouds grow black in their hues, and stand unrelieved against the gathering grey of the background; until imperceptible gloom thickens, and shuts out the last faint tinge of the daylight in the western sky. The morning is the transference of gloom into radiance, and quickens the thoughts and the heart; but evening is the blotting out of the landscape, and the incoming of the world's rest, and if the soul is akin with nature at all, it is then that it is reciprocal to the gentle touch of her sacred influences. And when thoughts are beclouded, hearts sad, the future uncertain, the combination of evening with the human soul is the nearer and the more reciprocal.

So here. Where one of the western windows of Lainshaw looked out to the westering sun, stood William Cuninghame and

Anna Montgomerie, and they spoke together of what had transpired, and of those things that might yet eventuate.

"I cannot pretend to be surprised that your father has spoken as he has done, Anna. I have felt all the while that I occupied a false position. To myself in the first place, because I cannot remain long in a menial capacity, even when it is assumed, without becoming more or less menial, and losing the respect and esteem of those whose respect and esteem I ought to possess; and to your father in the second, because I cannot pretend not to know that his kindness to me may be dangerous to himself and to you."

"I did not so speak, when I spoke to my father—on the contrary I combatted him with all the woman wit I had; but I felt as he felt so far as what he said regarded you personally. I never would yield—come what might—my position, so long as I thought I was in the right, for fear of consequences to myself. I am a believer in the strong mind as opposed to the strong hand, and have no faith in achieving good results by a policy of yielding to avert certain immediate consequences."

"And yet, Anna, it is immediate consequences that concern us most deeply."

"Yes, at the time, but the time being passes, and the future becomes the present—where are you then? If we could only see this matter to the end, I am convinced we would see that we have ample justification for following a straight course of duty regardless of present consequences. Once yield to circumstances, and they are your master."

"They have been my master all along. I have never been able to grip them."

"Very likely not, neither have I; but I am sure, none the less, that if I could grip them, and hold them down, and rise superior to them, I should be a better woman in the long run."

"You are a good enough woman, Anna, let circumstances be as they may."

"Don't flatter, William, this is no time for flattering; what are

you going to do? Whither are you going when you leave Lainshaw?"

"That, at any rate, must depend on circumstances. All I can say just now is that I am going out into the world. Very probably I'll see in the first place what the Earl of Glencairn has to say; but, in any case, I must be up and doing."

"I am afraid there is no help for it; and besides, I have begun even to doubt whether your continued residence here can do any good to the immediate object you have in view."

"The immediate object, Anna! What is the immediate object?"

"Why, the seizing of Robertland, should you get the chance—is that not the immediate object?"

"Well, it was, but since I came here, Anna——"

"Never mind, William, saying anything more just now. If you have given up the immediate object that brought you here, there is no immediate reason why you should remain any longer."

"But I haven't given it up, Anna. It is strengthened and not weakened by the other object that is now the more immediate."

"That may be, William, but I have no wish to learn what that is just now. Let me know, rather, what you intend to do to prosecute your original purpose."

"I am afraid I have nothing very definite in my mind. I hoped circumstances would favour me, but they keep on in the same groove, and things are not a bit more hopeful than they were."

"That is because you have not tried to grip them and make them subservient to a bold resolve. I am only a woman, but I think I could bend the circumstances to my will."

"In what way?"

"In many ways that I won't mention, as I am a woman of peace and averse to any more bloodshed. There has been too much of that already. But were I in your position I should go straight to the Earl of Glencairn and try and get as many men

from him as would accomplish my purpose. Then I would entice Gabriel out of Robertland by some means or other, and take possession of it. Once inside, and the gates shut, the house would be your own, and if you could possess yourself of it without any loss of life, the chances are—indeed, the certainty is—that no effort would be made to re-take it. The influence of Glencairn would keep you in possession of your own when it could not give you possession of it.”

“And if that should fail—if the Earl of Glencairn should refuse my request?”

“You could then think of something else. But why should it fail? Remember, though, William, that I am not advising you to any course—I am only saying what I would do were I in your place, and you must make up your mind for yourself.”

“I can but try, Anna.”

“Try, then, on your own responsibility, and not on mine. Do not let it be said that you required to be led by a woman. Act, I say, on your own resolve. If you have no intention of going through with it, the sooner you make for the south and for safety the better.”

“Never fear, Anna, I shall act as you suggest.”

“Not as I suggest, but as you think right. We may change the subject now, I think, William, but before we do just let me say this, that, woman as I am, I would be ashamed to let Gabriel Montgomerie triumph over me. You are, or you ought to be, a better man than he, and if you fail to cope with him, then you had better be dangling about the Courts of France or of Denmark than living in the stormy atmosphere of Ayrshire. The climate here nurtures men, William.”

“It has nurtured me, Anna, and it shall sustain me, else I am unworthy of being sustained.”

“But no bloodshed, remember that. And now, William, you leave to-morrow, and we had better say good-bye now.”

“If it must be, Anna.”

“Must be! Why, of course it must be.”

"I know that."

"Then why talk of it as if it were a matter for sighing?"

"I was thinking of leaving you, Anna."

"Think nothing of me. You have other things to think of meanwhile. Think of yourself, and in doing so you will think of your father and mother, and of the lands of Robertland."

"And of you, Anna."

"Never mind me, William. I can think for myself. You have enough to occupy your mind and your energies without obtruding me on them."

"Not so, Anna. Thinking of you, I shall be emboldened to the course I must take—shall I not then think of you?"

"If thereby you are in aught emboldened, you may. But say no more of that—you have the immediate future to deal with; the future that lies beyond must now take care of itself."

"But did I know that the future beyond hinged on the future immediate——"

"Mayhap it does—who knows? Good-bye, William. See, the stars are coming out."

"Good-bye, Anna."

William Cuninghame would have drawn Anna towards him, but, with her wonted calmness, she gently withdrew from the intended embrace, and hurried from the room.

Left alone, William still continued awhile to look abroad. The stars were shining. Wherein did he read the omens of the future? In the bright shining of the twinkling orbs against the blackness of the firmament? Or in the blackness of the firmament which the twinkling stars relieved? Youth is buoyant, and, backed by strong resolve, it reads its omens in the gleam and not in the gloom. And that is in the fitness of things.

The following evening, when the shades were anew falling on the landscape and the shadows were long, William Cuninghame left Lainshaw behind him and went out into the world. His feelings were mixed. He was dissatisfied with the months he had spent at Lainshaw, which had nothing to shew for them-

selves ; he was hopeful for the future, yet fearful as a solitary man with the unknown before him is ready to be ; and regretful that his association with Anna Montgomerie should have been interrupted. That after all was his loadstone. His father's lands, his own by right of inheritance, were a stake worth playing for ; victory over Gabriel Montgomerie was an aspiration that kindled his ambition almost to the verge of enthusiasm ; the restoration of the family name to the broad acres of Robertland—that also was an incentive that appealed to the wanderer. But beyond all these, deeper and higher too than them all, was the love he bore to his fair cousin. She was worth winning beyond all else ; and for her sake if not for his own he must do—what ? Something. He did not know what. But something he must do. Let the day declare it.

Whatever Anna thought, whatever Anna felt, her thoughts and her feelings were alike her own. She busied herself with her household duties as if no good-bye had been spoken, and as if she had not read in the last farewell the secret that William Cuninghame had shared with her. Hers it was to do—it was for others to spend the days in day-dreams and grow sentimental with the deepening twilight. Keenly sensitive to the future, she prepared for it by attention to the present. Sir Neill had a dim suspicion that she regarded the young laird of Robertland with a feeling that was more than cousinly ; but when he was gone, and he saw Anna busy with the ordinary every day work of the house, and as placidly cheerful as ever, he told himself that he had made a mistake, and wondered that things were not as he had suspected they might have been.

Nevertheless, when William Cuninghame, mounted on one of the best horses that the stable of Lainshaw could produce, rode out from underneath the walls of the keep, Anna watched his going, nor ceased until a distant turn in the path had hidden him from her view. And then she retired to her room and—wept ? No, she was too practical for that. She had half-an-hour's musings all by herself, relieved by the womanly weakness

of something approaching a sigh. After which she resumed her walk and conversation, as it was meet that a daughter of the feud should.

It so fell out that same evening that Gabriel Montgomerie was on one of his wonted quests for the young laird of Robertland. Gabriel had studied his description to the best of his ability, and he could have taken an oath that he could have picked him out among a hundred other people. He knew the colour of his hair, of his eyes, of his cheeks, the contour of his nose, the shape of his mouth, his height, his age, his general appearance. The one thing he did not know was where he was.

No, there was another thing he did not know. He knew William Cuninghame in the black and white of the hue and cry, but he did not know him instinct with life. He knew his true body, but not his reasonable soul—a juxtaposition that will be quite intelligible to everybody who has studied the Shorter Catechism, but quite incomprehensible in its full depth to anyone else. But then, in Scotland nearly everybody has studied the Shorter Catechism, and if anybody who reads these pages has not, he may rest assured that, save to him who has been indoctrinated into the *vade mecum* of faith and morals, it must be interpreted with the aid of a library of theology.

But that is a disquisition, and so I return to Gabriel, who, poor soul, knew nothing about the Shorter Catechism, but who, nevertheless, at that moment was fully alive to what his chief end was. He was possessed of his quest. The more he thought of it, the less he liked it. What business had this William Cuninghame to come sneaking around the lands of which he was the guardian? It was positively shabby in him thus to attempt to filch from Gabriel the inheritance which he had won from the offending laird beyond the seas. The laird had forfeited it in having raised his hand against the Earl of Eglinton; it was right and fitting that he, the representative of Eglinton, should retain the lands as his own, together with the house and all that pertained to it, as a set off to the iniquity of

the expatriated laird ; and now, for the expatriated laird's son to return to Ayrshire—it was a thing he had no right to do without his permission !

Deep in these thoughts he was approaching Lainshaw, though only to pass by it at a distance, when his eye lighted upon Sir Neill Montgomerie's new butler. The butler was riding a strong black horse. His general aspect was that of a yeoman, and when he saw Gabriel coming forward he pulled his steed respectfully to one side, and would have let him pass in the very centre of the way. But Gabriel was on the outlook for information, and here was the very man who might have information to give him. At all events it was worth trying—it was worth endeavouring to elicit something. So Gabriel reined up his horse, and bade the butler draw rein. And the butler, not wishing to offend so potent an individual as Gabriel Montgomerie, obeyed without questioning or hesitation, and waited to hear what Gabriel had to say.

“Well, William,” said Gabriel condescendingly and confidentially—in the very tones that he regarded as a certain specific for securing the confidence of his solitary auditor. “Well, William, you are late abroad ?”

“Yes, sir,” replied William, who kept his horse's head towards the way by which he intended to travel.

“It is not often you are so late abroad ?”

“No, sir, but I am not always the master of my own time or of my own journeyings ?”

“Whither away now, then ?”

“I am riding southward on business of my own.”

“After some pretty girl, I'll be bound, William ? But never mind, it is none of my business. You have just come from Lainshaw ?”

“Yes, sir.”

The instant William had made reply he remembered that he had disenthralled himself from the menial avocation which he had been pursuing, and he despised himself that he should thus

so deferentially address Gabriel Montgomerie. He did not court recognition, but he felt rising within him a sense of what was due to himself as the rightful heir to the lands over which Gabriel was lording it high-handedly. No sooner, therefore, had he replied to his interrogator than he resolved to pay him no further deference, but to reply to him as man to fellowman, equal to equal.

"Is Sir Neill at home?"

"He was when I left."

"Alone?"

"Alone, so far as I know."

"No visitors at Lainshaw?"

"None."

"Anna has told me, William," proceeded Gabriel, "that you are not a sympathiser with the Montgomeries."

"I was not aware of that."

"Well, that is the purport of what she said. The last butler was sent about his business because, she told me, he was a hot-headed partisan of the Eglinton cause; and therefore, I suppose, I am safe to assume that if you are not an active sympathiser with the Cuninghames, you are at least not over friendly to the Montgomeries."

"That is an assumption you make for yourself. I am not going to say that I am a sympathiser with one family or with another. I espouse my own cause."

"You espouse your own cause? What cause is that?"

"The cause of right, sir."

There was no deference in the "sir" this time; it was discharged with the ring of independence, even of challenge. The altered tone roused the amazement of Gabriel, and then the anger. What right had the butler of Lainshaw thus to address him? However, Gabriel stifled his ire yet a while, and resumed.

"You espouse the cause of right! What cause may that be?"

"My own," returned William.

"So? In that case perhaps you will not object to tell me what your cause is—your own or another's?"

"My own, I say, and not another's."

"You speak boldly, young man, considering whom you address, and the occupation you pursue?"

"I follow no occupation."

"What! Are you no longer butler to Sir Neill Montgomerie?"

"No."

"Ha, ha! Then the wind has shifted again. You have been dismissed his service, and you mean to have justice done you?"

"I do."

"Then, if that be your mind, we may yet sail in the same boat. Perhaps you will not hesitate to tell me whether you know ought of the whereabouts of William Cuninghame of Robertland. He is in this country-side somewhere or other, if I am not mistaken; and if you can conduct me to him, I would not hesitate to reward you handsomely."

"William Cuninghame of Robertland is in this country-side, but you will have to find him for yourself. He is homeless, he is landless, a fugitive and a wanderer. Where he may be at this moment I cannot say; but, methinks, you will not have to look long for him ere you find him."

"How so, sirrah? Speak that I may comprehend you."

"I have said all that I can say. William Cuninghame has come hither to regain his own; and what I say is the gospel truth. You will find him for yourself if you have only patience to wait and perseverance to seek for him."

"You speak in riddles, my friend, and I do not understand you."

"You will understand me soon enough."

"Has William Cuninghame, then, a force of men at his back?"

"Not one solitary trooper. He is alone, as I have said, and absolutely friendless."

"Then he means to work a miracle?"

"Like me, he means to have justice and his own."

"He can have all the justice he deserves as soon as he comes to search for it."

"That is all he desires. But I must hasten on, as the night grows late, and I have a mile or two to ride."

"I'll not detain you longer. But before you go, promise me that you will let me know where he is when you have found him."

"I will, sir, you may depend on me. You shall hear from me ere long."

"Thanks. Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

And William Cuninghame rode southwards towards Kilmaurs, while Gabriel Montgomerie resumed his way to Robertland.

CHAPTER XX

ANGRY MEN ENCOUNTER AT LAINSHAW.

THE long summer days mellowed into autumn; and autumn in its turn grew grey as the winter came on. The bright green leaves of the trees that had waved and rustled their pleasant sheen in the soft southern winds, shrivelled up and dropped to their mother earth, and there they either rotted as they lay and gave back to the soil the nourishment on which they had lived, or else curled themselves up and blew about hither and thither as the winds listed. The trees themselves grew black against the murky skies, and the cold winds moaned in their leafless branches as only winter winds can moan. The

grain had all been cut down in the fields—and little of it there had been to cut—and the bright hues had gone out of the grass and the underbrush ; and, instead of the warm genial rains of the summer, the vapoury clouds discharged cold showers, or, banked in alternate layers of sombre depth and darkness, discharged their snowy particles with a persistency that seemed to indicate, from its very restlessness, that the spring-time would come again no more.

All the while the days were lengthening, events kept moving on. The Earl of Glencairn, sometimes in Edinburgh, or in Stirling, or wherever else it pleased King James to hold his court, and sometimes in Ayrshire, was exercising all the influence of which he was possessed to obtain remission of the sentences passed upon his followers, and re-possession of the lands which the Montgomeries were holding in trust for themselves. But so far his efforts had been without avail. The monarch was difficult to move. He had not yet forgotten the death of the Earl of Eglinton, nor that the lairds who held the estates of the Cuninghames had taken guilt to themselves and had fled the country.

The Earl of Glencairn looked to peaceful means to accomplish his ends ; and he would not sanction any attempt on the part of William Cuninghame to retake the castle of Robertland. And what was equally to the purpose, he would not permit his followers to ride beneath William Cuninghame's guidance and endeavour to re-capture Robertland by strategy. William pressed him as closely as a scion of his house could press the Earl of Glencairn ; but to all his appeals and arguments the Earl was deaf. He preferred the arts of the politician to those of the soldier.

In the dark days of the winter Gabriel Montgomerie had time and to spare for reflection. His mind was as far from rest as ever. He would fain have gone to Lainshaw, but pride and wounded vanity, and his own declaration that he would not return until he had changed his mind, kept him from adventuring

within the portals which he had closed upon himself. He was still fretting and fuming because of William Cuninghame; and that he could find no trace of him, kept alive the fear that he was still working, and might work successfully in the dark, for the restoration of his ancestral acres and home. The personal aspect of the grievance deepened with the passing days, so that he had begun to regard himself as the rightful owner of Robertland, against whom and for whose overthrow William Cuninghame was plotting, and scheming, and working. He was anxious for action; the sameness of the life he led palled upon him; and he still maintained his quest in search of the returned Cuninghame, riding wherever fancy led him.

Nor was his quest any longer quite fruitless, as we shall see immediately.

Gabriel had taken his way southward, towards Kilmaurs. He had even passed Kilmaurs, giving it a wide berth, and he was journeying along the King's highway that led to the ancient town of Kilmarnock. Behind him followed five of his men; for, bold as Gabriel was, he knew the terrors of the highway in that land of the enemy, and seldom ventured any considerable distance from Robertland unattended.

As they were jogging along they heard coming up on the wind the noise of a body of horsemen. The sound was distant, but the air was calm and clear and resonant; and the galloping horse hoofs indicated the advance of such a large body of riders that Gabriel thought it wise to retire into the depths of a neighbouring friendly plantation. Dismounting, he handed the reins to one of his attendants, and secured a coign of vantage, from which he could see without being seen. Out of this he peered as the horsemen approached, and he watched them as they cantered by.

He watched them, but he only saw one among the number, the leader of the band. He rode in front. He had all the air of a leader. Dignified in mien, he sat on his horse like a knight

of the olden time. The horse was a powerful black charger, of striding step, and high in mettle.

Gabriel had seen that man before. He was visible only for a few seconds as he hurried along, but every feature in his face wrought itself into the mind and the eye of the watcher. Who was he? A Cuninghame without a doubt. But who? Had he not recognised the features as familiar he might have come to the instant conclusion that the leader of the troop of horsemen, who were riding towards Kilmaurs, was the young laird of Robertland ; but the fact that the face was familiar to him drove the half-formed thought from his mind. For this man he had seen somewhere ; the young laird of Robertland he had never seen. Who then could he be ?

Gabriel took the likeness home with him. It accompanied him every foot of the journey. All the day long it was his constant companion. It intruded itself upon the festive intercourse of the evening. It was amid the faces that surrounded the social board. It looked at him from the smoke of the sirloin, and he saw it in the pictures on the walls. The wainscoting had it, the vacant atmosphere of the passages held it impalpably ; it gazed upon him when he retired to bed, and when the lights were put out, and darkness and silence sat upon the scene, it was there still. He could not get rid of it. He shut his eyes—it was there still. He turned his face to the wall—it came between him and the wall. He shook himself together and thought to shake it into the abyss, but pertinaciously it retained its place, and not even the blackness of the darkness could obscure or blot out its outlines. It was a face of destiny—of Gabriel Montgomerie's destiny ; and he felt that it was. It was part of his fortune—and he knew it. And all the live long night, until the gloomy, silent, slow-pacing hours of the morning watches, it kept him unfailing company.

A handsome enough face, too, was the face that haunted him. No shadow of the spiritland, as youth calls up in the night time the faces of a terrified imagination ; but a face he had seen, into

whose living eyes he had gazed ; whose living lips he had heard speak.

Gabriel steadied himself anew to think, and as he thought, he saw anew the cavalcade ride bye ; and then with a rush the clustering sequence came to him. He had but caught a momentary glimpse of the horse, but as he recalled the dark charger, he grasped the key that unlocked the mystery. That horse had been Sir Neill Montgomerie's. Where had he seen it before? He had seen it frequently. A year ago, on the morning when he had first awaked from his dreams in Robertland, Sir Neill had ridden it across from Lainshaw. He had seen it in its stall, on the highway, in the fields. He had last seen it when the butler——

The butler ! Gabriel sat bolt upright in bed, and rubbed his eyes to make sure that he was awake. Aye, awake he surely was. That butler was the man whom he had seen ride past him at the head of the horsemen of grey Kilmaurs. Fool he was not to have recognised him !

Again the face struck through the darkness. It was the face of the description of William Cuninghame, the young laird of Robertland. And the late butler of Lainshaw, the leader of the horsemen, and the young laird of Robertland were one and the same person. And he the creature of Gabriel Montgomerie's destiny !

Gabriel cursed his luck. He had let his chance go bye. One chance, at any rate ; a series of chances, any one of which he might have taken. He had had William Cuninghame at his mercy, and in his ignorance he had spared him. But perhaps it was not too late even yet ?

But if these things were so, what of Sir Neill Montgomerie and Anna ? Had they not compromised themselves fatally ? Had they not sacrificed the honour of the house of Montgomerie ? Had they not sheltered an enemy to the cause of Eglinton ? Here was a revenge to hand ! Here was excuse sufficient for him to return to Lainshaw and tax them with their

perfidy. And by the heavens above him, he would return, and that, too, when the day dawned, and lay his charge at their door. Anna had had her turn. It was his now. She had slighted him, and the day would declare it.

The sun rose late, as became a winter's morning, but not too late to rise on Gabriel Montgomerie's wrath. The hours when deep sleep should have come upon him he had spent wrestling with that countenance awaiting recognition, and with the after-thoughts begotten of the recognition; and arising from bed unslept, and his mind still seething with disappointment and with passion, he mounted his horse and rode away for Lainshaw.

The crisp, cold air of the early forenoon cooled his brow, but not his brain. There was nothing appealing to the senses in the aspect of nature—all was an appeal to desolation. There was nothing to tempt Gabriel out of himself, to withdraw his mind from inward contemplation, and to raise his thoughts from the narrow, deep groove into which they had fallen. On the contrary, the desolation without found counterpart within, and accentuated it. So that when he came within sight of the walls of Lainshaw, Gabriel was wrought to the point of explosion. He felt a qualm as he remembered his resolve no more to re-enter the dwelling of Sir Neill Montgomerie, but the qualm quickened him instead of retarding him. He did not stay to question with himself, but hurried onward with a vague idea in his mind that whereas the situation had been his master when last he stood beneath the roof-tree of Lainshaw, he was now master of the situation. The position was changed.

Dismounting from his horse and throwing the reins to an attendant, he entered the house. His visit was a surprise, and the manner of his coming. It was early forenoon, when visitors were rare; and he hastened into the hall and strode onwards towards the dining-room, as if Lainshaw were his own and he had a right to be irate if he chose. He demanded that Sir Neill Montgomerie should be forthwith called; and then he looked out of the window, and looked at the landscape, without

seeing it. On its frowning, sombre face, he gazed with frowning visage.

Sir Neill entered the room. He had heard the manner of Gabriel's coming. He had heard the galloping horse, and had looked forth to see whom it bore. He had seen the angry countenance of the rider, and he surmised the outbreak of the storm. He was therefore the better prepared to resist it.

"Good morning, Gabriel," said Sir Neill, as he entered the room, and extended his hand to his visitor.

"Good morning," Gabriel curtly replied, without taking notice of the proffered hand.

Sir Neill stifled the rebuke he felt inclined to administer, and invited Gabriel to be seated.

"No," was Gabriel's reply, "I'll stand where I am. I'll sit down no more in Lainshaw."

"Then, sir," returned Sir Neill, "permit me to say at the outset, and at once, that, if you cannot be seated any more in Lainshaw, Lainshaw is no place for you."

"I know that—Lainshaw is no place for me. Would to God that I never had seen it!"

"Pray be seated, Gabriel. Seated you must be if you are to remain here. I am master in this house, sir, and not you, and if you come hither, you must respond to the ordinary courtesies of life."

"I can say all that I have to say standing as well as sitting, and I prefer to have my own way."

"And I intend to have mine, so sit down, ere I give audience to what you have to say."

"No, Sir Neill, I will not sit down."

"Then you will leave the house. I am not going to be brow-beaten in Lainshaw. You know the alternative—the chair, sir!"

Gabriel was furious at being taken so sharply at the outset. It disconcerted such pre-arrangement of his ideas as there was; and he feared to give way; but the persistent coolness of Sir

Neill and the determination which he displayed—for Sir Neill, foreseeing trouble, had resolved to grip it at the outset—was too much for him ; and he was forced to comply.

He justified his compliance with the reflection that the sole object of his visit was to unfold his mind to Sir Neill Montgomerie, and that if he had not complied he should not have been able to fulfil his intent. But that justification was not begotten of the instant ; it was the result of subsequent search for it.

The trifling victory of Sir Neill in no way tended to assuage Gabriel's wrath ; on the contrary it fanned it.

"Well, now," said Sir Neill, after Gabriel had seated himself, "you have come to say something. I will hear it now."

"You will not have long to wait. What I have to say is best said in few words. I am here to denounce you as an enemy to the house of Montgomerie."

Sir Neill started to his feet.

"What !" he exclaimed angrily, "dare you so insult me within the walls of my own dwelling ?"

"I dare," replied Gabriel, "and I shall tell you why ere I leave. But sit down, Sir Neill. You were not willing that I should stand, and so I should prefer that you should be seated."

"Go on, sir, with your accusation," Sir Neill returned, biting his lip as he obeyed Gabriel's injunction. "I wait your denunciation."

"Then, Sir Neill, I say again, as I said before, that you are an enemy to the house of Montgomerie. I might have known it sooner. It was from your house that the Earl of Eglinton went forth to his death ; but instead of joining in the retribution you have kept yourself secure and safe within the shelter of Lainshaw, and left to others the hard knocks and the work of retaliation."

"Well, sir, what next ?"

"You have permitted your family to be indoctrinated in all the sympathies of the Cuninghame family, when they ought to

have been educated to hatred of all who bore the name of Cuninghame, or followed the lead of the Earl of Glencairn."

"Next?"

"I am coming to what will interest you, Sir Neill. You remember that a year ago one of your servants, your butler, was an ardent and active sympathiser in the cause of the Montgomeries?"

"Well?"

"You dismissed him and sent him about his business, and in his place you engaged another butler, a man—a menial!—whose sympathies were with the Cuninghames? For months you retained that man in your service, and then you sent him, too, about his business?"

"Go on."

"You remember that you and I spoke together about William Cuninghame of Robertland, and that I told you I was searching for him? Well, I have found him."

"Cease your remonstrances, sir," interrupted Sir Neill. "I'll have no more of them. Who are you that you dare come to Lainshaw and put me through my catechism? Why should I longer demean myself by listening to a series of questions of this kind from you? I'll have no more of them, I tell you. You are not the man to whom I must justify myself. No man lives to whom I intend to offer justification. What I have done, that I should be prepared to do again, and I will not that you or any other member of the house of Montgomerie should call me to account."

"But you have not heard me out, Sir Neill."

"Nor shall I. I know what you are going to say. You are going to reproach me with permitting William Cuninghame of Robertland to remain under this roof. But wherein does that concern you?"

"Wherein does that concern me, Sir Neill? It concerns me every way. I am here to execute vengeance upon the house of Robertland. I am here to do to its members what its head

helped to do to the Earl of Eglinton when he was treacherously slain that afternoon he left this house—your house, Sir Neill ! I am here to cut them off root and branch, and yet you ask me wherein I am concerned that William Cuninghame of Robertland should return to Ayrshire ? ”

“ Cease, Gabriel, cease your talking. I have heard enough. You have come hither to taunt me with what I have done ? Where is your warrant for such interference ? ”

“ My warrant is my duty. But it is not me alone that you have to reckon with. It is the whole house of Montgomerie from the Master of Eglinton down, and you may rest satisfied that you shall be called to stern account. ”

“ That shall never be. I am my own master to come and to go, to have and to hold, as I see fit. I am bound only to myself, to my conscience, to my duty. I am not concerned to know what you think of my conduct. It will not disturb my peace of mind that you disapprove of it. If the Master of Eglinton demands that I should justify myself, my duty towards him, as the head of the house of Montgomerie, will not be disregarded ; but till he demands that justification, rest content that I shall go on my way careless alike of what you may say, or do, or think. I am not bounden or beholden to you in any degree, and I am as far removed from fear of you as I am superior to your reproaches and your taunts. So get you gone, Gabriel Montgomerie ; get you back to Robertland, and learn that there is at least one Montgomerie who is careless alike of your scorn and your smile. ”

Gabriel boiled with passion.

“ You are a man of braver words than deeds,” he retorted tauntingly. “ You dare not emphasise your words as a soldier should. ”

“ I am no soldier,” replied Sir Neill steadily, “ and I have never sought the blood of any man. But you have brought chastisement upon yourself, and, by Heavens, you shall have it. ”

"I am ready to take it," returned Gabriel, drawing his sword as he spoke.

"Put up your weapon, sir. This is neither the time nor the place to square accounts. Put up your weapon and leave my house. I know not whether I shall even condescend to cross swords with you."

"Condescend, Sir Neill! Condescend! Condescend to cross swords with Gabriel Montgomerie of Hazlehead! By my soul, but you shall eat your words or receive the reward of your insolence."

"Leave the house, sir," sternly ordered Sir Neill. "Leave Lainshaw at once."

"Not until I obtain satisfaction," Gabriel replied angrily. "From this I do not stir until you have made amends for the words you have used, or given me the satisfaction that I demand."

"But you shall leave the house, Gabriel Montgomerie."

The words were not those of Sir Neill. Attracted by the sound of the angry voices, Anna had approached the door of the room; and fearful lest the rising passions of her father and Gabriel might result in an overt act of violence, she did not scruple to enter.

Gabriel turned as the words were spoken, with added fury reflected in his eyes.

"You here!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," Anna replied, as she placed herself between her father and Gabriel. "Yes, I am here, and here I intend to remain."

"This is no place for you," Gabriel retorted. "Sir Neill and I have matters to settle that do not call for any interference."

Anna bit her lip, but otherwise gave no token of what she felt. She remained in the position she had assumed on entering; and looking Gabriel full in the face she said—

"You have heard what my father has said. How can you persist in remaining here when you have been ordered hence?"

"I tell you, Anna," Gabriel repeated, "this is no place for you. Leave us alone. We are quite competent to discuss and to settle matters our own way."

"I am not in the habit of being so spoken to in my father's house," said Anna in reply; "and I am not going to take my orders from you; and if you do not retire, my father and I shall, and leave you to make your exit as you like."

"I shall not remain one second after I have said my say; but until I have said it, to you as well as to your father, here I remain. I know all your machinations and intriguing. I know how you have harboured William Cuninghame, and I came here to denounce, as I have denounced, your father as a traitor to the house of Montgomerie."

"You lie, sir!" shouted Sir Neill. "The name of traitor is not one that either you or any other man can apply, and apply truthfully, to me."

"Never mind him, father," said Anna, with her wonted coolness. "It is not worth your while to pay any attention to such a bare and ridiculous assertion."

"No," sarcastically said Gabriel, smiling bitterly as he spoke. "Your father is not easily stung into retaliation; but I speak the truth when I say that you have wronged the name of Montgomerie in harbouring William Cuninghame. A pretty varlet, forsooth! William Cuninghame, the young Laird of Robertland, a butler; a menial in the house of Lainshaw!"

"Cease your reproaches, Gabriel; I care not for them. They are light as the air to me, and they fall to the ground like the snowflake. And if you can but take my advice, you will get back to Robertland and resume your ward, and leave my father and me alone. We are not to be frightened by your menaces. You would not dare to raise a hand against your own kith and kin."

"What I would dare I cannot tell until I have put myself to the test; but I would dare much to discover how I might lay my hands upon your late butler; though, sooth to say, it is not

meet that a Montgomerie should lay his hands upon one whose ambition rises no higher than that of a menial in the house of his uncle."

"You may rail to your heart's content, Gabriel, but you cannot rail me into forgetting what I owe to myself. You may find William Cuninghame sooner than you expect, and he may come to look for you, instead of your being compelled to look for him. Until then, reserve your energy and passion, for you may need them."

"Thanks for your advice, Anna. I wish, in heaven's name, that William Cuninghame were here now. I have no higher ambition than to meet him face to face where no interruption is possible, and where we can settle who is to be master of Robertland."

"I tell you, you may meet with him ere long. But, Gabriel, you have not yet obeyed my father's orders. You have said your say, I think, and now you may go."

"I go, Anna, but not for your weal. I go to lay the whole matter before the Master of Eglinton, and it will remain with him to say how far Sir Neill possesses the confidence of his kinsman, and how far he is worthy of trust."

"Go, Gabriel, go where you like, but go. Do what you like, say what you like to the Master of Eglinton, but go, and go now."

"I obey you, Anna. I go to seek your cousin, and when I find him I shall let you know."

"And I tell you to go and seek for him, and you may not have long to search."

"No? Why?"

"Why? Because——"

"Because he is here!"

And as the words fell like a thunderbolt upon the astonished ears of Sir Neill, Anna, and Gabriel, William Cuninghame walked into the apartment, and stood up face to face with Gabriel Montgomerie.

CHAPTER XXI.

WINTER, ITS DOINGS AND ITS CONFERENCES.

IN the quiet of Kilmaurs William Cuninghame had fretted as became a man who felt that action, and not rest, should have been his portion. The Earl of Glencairn had placed his faith in pacific methods. These bore no instant fruit; they hardly gave promise of blossom; and William wearied of the enforced inaction, and that for more reasons than one. A lurking, never-absent feeling of revenge prompted him as he recalled the deeds done to the Cuninghames, and as he thought of the Montgomerie lording it over the lands of Robertland. Time was fleeting, and the more and the farther it lapsed, the more determined he became to regain his own. And there was the stimulus of Anna Montgomerie; half Montgomerie she in blood, but more than half Cuninghame in heart and in sympathy.

What could Anna think of his stolidity and his inaction and his peaceful, aimless dwelling in the halls of peace? Not all aimless, but aimless so far as it was hopeless of early effort and stirring enterprise. An explanation was due to her, and in person.

And thus it was that William Cuninghame had ridden across to Lainshaw, and had come upon the scene at the very moment when Gabriel Montgomerie was asserting his anxiety to meet with him face to face.

They met, and face to face. There was a barrier between; a frail barrier; but they looked past it, straight into one another's eyes. The scene in the dining hall of Lainshaw was dramatic in its grouping. When William Cuninghame entered, he strode right into the centre of the room, nor did he call a halt until he was within three or four feet of the man who had in his own

mind doomed him to death, and whose one predominant ambition was to meet him where no interruption was possible, and slay him even as the Earl of Eglinton had been slain. Gabriel was taken aback, but he was ready. He moved backwards no step, nor did he advance by an hair-breadth, but his eyes glared upon Cuninghame and he laid his hand upon the butt of a pistol in his belt. Sir Neill Montgomerie stretched forth his arms as if to separate the ready combatants, but ere he could interfere, Anna, with ready purpose, and instinctive in her resolve, walked quietly between them and took up her position. Whatever she felt was her own possession. She betrayed no outward emotion, save that the warm blood flushed her cheek and she bit her lip. But that was to restrain herself; it was no evidence of shaken nerves. Her face was calm, her eyes steady; and standing sideways, so as to turn with equal facility either to the young laird of Robertland or Gabriel Montgomerie, she retained her position with a placidity and a self-possession that effectually checked the young men from trying conclusions then and there.

But for Anna, the fray could not have been delayed. All the elements were at hand. She was the interposing barrier which denied.

"What devil's wind has brought you hither, next?" exclaimed Sir Neill, as he eyed the young laird of Robertland.

"No devil's wind, uncle," replied William Cuninghame, "but fortune, or fate, or something else. And I have but come in time, too; for, unless my ears deceived me, I heard this gentleman here as I entered expressing his anxiety to meet with me. I heard Anna, too, declare that he might meet with me sooner than he expected, and I thought it would be a pity if her prophecy were to go unfulfilled. That is why I am here, and, sooth to say, I do not seem a welcome guest."

"Make no mistake on that point, sir," spake Gabriel, "you are welcome to me if to no one else, for I have long desired to meet with you."

"And I with you, sir," repeated William, scowling defiantly at Gabriel.

"Well, there is no time like the present," returned Gabriel, "and if Anna will but stand aside, there can be no place better than this."

"There," interposed Sir Neill, "there you mistake yourself, Gabriel. There shall be no combat either here or now. If you must fight, you must fight elsewhere and at another time; but of this situation I am master, and I refuse you permission to draw swords or pistols this day, or at Lainshaw."

"I should be sorry to thwart this gentleman's evident anxiety to measure weapons with me," said Gabriel, addressing Sir Neill, but eyeing William Cuninghame all the while, "and Lainshaw has not always been so foreign to the clash of swords or the rattle of fire-arms that you need hesitate to sanction what seems to be our mutual desire."

"Nay, I will have no fighting," replied Sir Neill, firmly, "so you can bottle up your passions for a future day. If you are as anxious to meet as you seem to be, the day cannot be long distant, but you are in my private house and therefore you must not disobey my behests."

"I can wait," said William Cuninghame, "I can wait a more convenient time and place. I am not likely to deny hostile meeting to Gabriel Montgomerie or any other man who is anxious to have it."

"If this gentleman is anxious to have it put off," Gabriel replied, "or if he is afraid of the present, I too can afford to wait, but you will remember," he added, addressing William, "that it is you who have craved delay and not I. I should scorn to crave a moment's putting off."

"Do not mistake me, sir," William rejoined, "I am ready here and now to meet you on even terms, or whenever or wherever you may appoint, but I owe too much to Sir Neill Montgomerie to disregard his command. But rest assured, I shall find you ere long, and you shall not have to seek long for me either."

"Yes," tauntingly replied Gabriel, "I know you owe much to Sir Neill. You were his servant, you know—his butler! You waited at his table; you danced attendance upon him, and I presume, therefore, that when he commands you, you have no alternative to obedience."

Stung by the irony and the taunts of Gabriel, William Cuningham advanced a step; but Anna raised her hand and waved him back.

"Do not disconcert yourself, William," she said, "with the taunts and gibes of Gabriel Montgomerie. They are unworthy of him, and you must rise superior to them."

"They are unworthy of me, are they?" retorted Gabriel. "Why should I demean myself condescending to fight a menial?"

"You lie, sir," William declared, shutting his clenched fist, "and I throw the lie back in your teeth."

Quick as thought, Gabriel drew from his belt the pistol whose butt he had been fingering all through the interview; but instant as was the action, it was forestalled by Anna, who, stretching out her hand, laid hold of the weapon.

"Give it to me, Gabriel!" she said. "Give it up at once, I say. There shall be no murder done in Lainshaw. Too much life has been lost in this quarrel already."

"Did you not hear what he said?" demanded Gabriel. "Did you not hear him call me a liar?"

"Give up the pistol, I say," replied Anna. "You would not have a woman try to take it from you by force?"

"I cannot submit to such language. What I said was the truth—it was no lie."

"William Cuningham was our guest," returned Anna; "and even if he had not been our guest, you have no right to use such language as you have uttered. Give me the weapon, or replace it in your belt."

"I can bide my time," Gabriel ejaculated; "and if it is delayed the longer, the time will come, notwithstanding all the

delay." And as he spoke he replaced the pistol in the leather case of his belt.

"Enough!" It was Sir Neill who spoke. "We have had enough of this. Cease your recriminations a moment, both of you, and listen to what I have to say. I am all but hopeless that you will take advice; but if you are not dead to reason, bethink yourselves of the consequences of the step you are meditating. Wherein would you be enlarged, William Cuninghame, by the death of Gabriel Montgomerie? You would but add fuel to the flame; you would but spread the blaze further. It smoulders just now; it may die out if you but cease to fan it—why then should you re-kindle the conflagration? Believe me, that neither his death nor his life can advantage you, or be to your disadvantage. He holds Robertland, not in his own right, but as the emissary of the Master of Eglinton; and if you were to take his life, the Master would thereby but strengthen his hold on Robertland, and you would be further from it than ever. And you, Gabriel, I know that you hope to secure yourself in permanent possession of Robertland by the death of William Cuninghame. You build your hopes on the sands. You grasp the shadow. The King will decree who is to hold Robertland, and your battle is not to be fought out in Ayrshire, but at the Court of the Sovereign; and were you to accomplish the death of the heir of Robertland, you would be further from your goal than you are to-day. I urge you both, then, to forbear. Let the past alone; the future will evolve itself."

"I hear what you say," replied Gabriel, doggedly, "but your advice comes too late."

"Advice never comes too late to the wise man," rejoined Sir Neill.

"If you will not listen to my father's counsel," said Anna, "listen to mine. I appeal to you, to both of you, on other grounds. I appeal to your sense of what is due to your manhood. I appeal to you in the name of common sense. What gain has it been to the Cuninghames that they slew the Earl of

Eglinton? Let the dead reply. Let those who have fled their country reply. Further bloodshed will but accentuate bitterness and reprisal. The houses of Eglinton and Glencairn were standing in their might long ere either of you came upon the scene; they will remain in their might long after you are forgotten. And is material advantage to be compensated by the shedding of blood, by the taking of one another's lives? You may take life away; you cannot restore it. Death is irrevocable."

"It is a pity," retorted Gabriel, "that the Cuninghames did not think of that sooner."

"It is," replied Anna, "it is a pity, a thousand pities. The re-opening of this feud has been the curse of the country-side. But it is not too late to heal the wounds."

"They have been too long open to be healed all at once," said Gabriel.

"And so you would open them the wider! But if you will neither listen to me nor to reason, get you gone, Gabriel. You have been too long here."

"I go now," Gabriel replied, "deaf alike to your reasoning and your appeals. Robertland was won by the strong hand, and the strong hand shall hold it."

"See then that you keep the grip the tighter," returned William Cuninghame.

"You shall not unclasp it, Sir," replied Gabriel; "I go, to receive you when you come to take possession of your own."

"And as Anna has said, 'You shall not have long to wait.'"

William Cuninghame had not finished speaking ere Gabriel strode heavily from the room. Without another word he proceeded to the stable, led out his charger, and galloped away.

"You, too, must hasten hence," said Anna, addressing Cuninghame, "for if Gabriel has but time to think, he will muster his followers and way-lay you."

"That would cut short my intent. The Earl of Glencairn has refused me his followers, else I should have retaken Robert-

land ere now ; but I go now hence to Renfrewshire. The laird of Newark will not deny me assistance."

"Go where you like, William, but go at once," rejoined Anna with manifest anxiety. "I cannot blame you for trying to regain your own. But remember," she added, "no more bloodshed."

"No more than I can help, Anna."

"No more than you can help! No more at all, I say. Gabriel lacks in discretion, but his courage is high, and therefore you must retake Robertland by strategy."

William Cuninghame returned that day straightway to Kilmaurs, and ere noon Lainshaw had resumed its accustomed quiet, and Anna her wonted household vocations.

It was well for the young laird of Robertland that he wasted no time in obeying Anna's injunctions. Gabriel Montgomerie, whatever his reason may have told him, was furious with the present fury. He cared not a straw what the future might have in store for him ; what concerned him was to find an outlet for his wrath. Ordered by Sir Neill Montgomerie to leave Lainshaw, bearded by William Cuninghame, and despised by Anna, he must retaliate upon all three ; and how better could he retaliate than by instant reprisal upon the young laird of Robertland. Why should he not retrace his steps and waylay him ?

No sooner did the idea enter Gabriel's mind than he proceeded to act upon it. He reined in his horse, he turned his horse's head towards Kilmaurs, and, skirting Lainshaw at a distance, he travelled along the main road that led to the stronghold of Glencairn, and in a thicket by the wayside he hid all afternoon, nursing his wrath, determined on revenge. His thoughts were his only companion, and they were not of the pleasantest. He brooded over his wrongs, and kept his ire alive by meditating revenge. The sun went down on his wrath. The moon rose upon it ; the stars shone out upon it ; the cold winds of the evening sighed over it and around it, chilling Gabriel's body, but leaving his soul and his temper uncooled. Darkness,

mental and natural, enveloped him, enswathed him, lighted only by the lurid fires which he himself had kindled in his soul ; and the deeper the blackness of the night, the darker grew his spirit.

Wearied with watching, benumbed with cold, and faint with hunger, Gabriel was at length compelled to the conviction that his vigil was a failure, that his victim had escaped him, and he was constrained to abandon his seclusion and return to Robertland.

Patrick Maxwell of Newark, though he had slain Sir Robert Montgomerie of Skelmorlie and his son, in revenge for the slaughter of his kinsman on the streets of Paisley, was as yet unappeased ; and when William Cuninghame, riding down by the pouring waters of Clyde, halted at Newark, he accorded him hearty welcome, and sympathetic, and he promised him the aid of fifty men, when the winter was over, to enable him to retake Robertland. Meanwhile he counselled him to return to Kilmaurs, and there remain with the Earl of Glencairn, giving such service as he could render, willingly, and so doing his duty as to ensure the friendship and regard of the powerful chief of the Cuninghames. William was impatient to begin operations at once, and pressed Maxwell to permit his followers to take their journey to Ayrshire without loss of time ; but Maxwell had no wish for enterprise, amid the rigours and the snows of the winter, that did not immediately concern himself, and William Cuninghame was compelled to return to Kilmaurs, and there await the coming of the vernal equinox.

It was a period of waiting. William Cuninghame and Gabriel Montgomerie were alike biding their time. Sir Neill was waiting and longing for the dawning of the social spring that was to heal the scaurs of the too-long winter of warfare and tumult and disorder ; and Anna was waiting in the expectation of hearing that the young laird of Robertland had triumphed over his difficulties, and re-entered the home of his fathers.

But because it was a period of waiting, it was not necessarily a period of inaction or idleness. Gabriel succeeded in putting

the Master of Eglinton into a quandary. He represented after his own fashion the enormity of the offence done to the common interest by Sir Neill Montgomerie, and the Master felt that he ought to do something. But what, he was at a loss to know. He would rather have heard nothing about it, because, like the Lord of Kilmaurs, he was exercising what influence he could command at Court, and was endeavouring to ingratiate himself with King James. The one thing he knew that the sovereign was resolved upon, was that there should be no further bloodshed. To-day he sided with the Master, to-morrow with the Earl; to-day the Montgomeries were in favour, to-morrow he gave ear to the Cuninghames; and, therefore, to re-open the feud, or to extend it to a war of Montgomerie against Montgomerie, of Lainshaw against his brethren, would be effectually to place the monarch against the Master.

The Master was forced into policy; and after the fashion of politicians of all ages and of all parties when in difficulty, he said he would see to it, counselled Gabriel to steadfastness and to moderation, and said he had no doubt that Gabriel was alive to his duties and responsibilities, and that he trusted him to the full, and to the world's end if necessary.

The Master's messages gratified Gabriel, but the gratification wore off, and he felt that he must act for himself; so he watched Robertland as assiduously as ever, scouring the country when inclination so led him, and built castles in the air, or stimulated himself to the execution of vengeful projects in view of innumerable problematical contingencies.

Nor was Anna idle. With her woman wit she succeeded in calling to her aid at least two humble members of the Cuninghame following. One of these was the tenant of the farm of Pearce Bank, Robert Hall, who had succeeded in escaping the raid of Eglinton, and had returned to his holding, who made it his duty to ascertain how many of the old retainers of the expatriated or dead lairds of the Cuninghame family were still willing to unite for the old cause; the other was one of the domestic

servants of Robertland whom Gabriel had condescendingly permitted to live when he first took possession of the house, and who, life-long to Robertland, continued in the immediate vicinity. His sympathies were with the old laird, now living on the continent of Europe ; and he was not slow to be persuaded that it was his duty to keep Anna posted in such information as he thought might be to her interest, and which included much intelligence of a desultory and detailed nature which was of no use to anybody. Which information she in turn managed to convey to William Cuninghame in the Castle of Kilmaurs.

Sir Neill held frequent converse with Captain Stewart, sometimes at Ochiltree, sometimes at Lainshaw ; and many a time they walked together and talked with one another of the lions that were in the path. During one of Captain Stewart's visits to Lainshaw, the conversation as usual turned to the invariable theme.

"I hardly know how it will all end, Captain Stewart," said Sir Neill. "I am between two fires. The Montgomeries distrust me. I know they do. They seldom come hither ; and if by chance a solitary member of the family looks in, in passing, he ever seems to me to be on the outlook for something suspicious."

"I am afraid you are suspicious yourself, Sir Neill," returned Captain Stewart, "else you would not systematically discover suspicion in others. And in any case, you must remember that you have not allied yourself with the Eglinton battle as other Montgomeries have done."

"The battle has not allied itself with me, rather. From its first beginning the Montgomeries have kept me at a distance. They purposely slighted me when they took the initiative against the Cuninghames, and since then they have done nothing to indicate that they have forgotten their coldness on that occasion."

"I would think no more of that, Sir Neill. For my part, I am not surprised now, if they have held aloof from you. How

could you have expected them to have come to you and sought your aid, when their suspicions were kindled against your wife, and when they were verified by later revelations? Why should you trouble yourself? You but extend the suspicion, not allay it, by such action."

"That may be, but I am as jealous of the family honour as any man among them, and would go as far and do as much for its advancement as any man between this and the town of Irvine. But what concerns me even more than that, is that, being a man who makes for peace, I should be in the very centre of the whirlpool. While I would fain be in the smooth water without, I am in the vortex."

"Neither you, Sir Neill, nor any man, is master of his own destiny. It is fate that masters us all. It comes to us. We may go out to meet it; we may court its coming; but it will come to us all the same if we remain cloistered at home, or even mount the fleetest of steeds and flee from it. You, like other men, are born to your destiny, and if you are a wise man you will borrow a little fatalism from the Turk, and take fate as it comes. Rest assured that all is for the best."

"I know it is, as a matter of belief. I cannot controvert you in the enunciation of the dogma, but it is easier to accept general beliefs than to apply them to your own individual case."

"True, but that does not destroy the truth of the dogmas, for all that. You know I have had my day, my troubles, my cares. I have had my ambition, my uprising, my downfall. I have tasted the sweets of honour, and experienced the bitterness of adversity and ostracism. Time was—as it seems but yesterday—when my word was law, and when peers of the realm came to my feet and held the stirrup while I mounted into the saddle; now I must solace myself with the quiet of Ochiltree. I have ridden in progress that was all but royal and—but why should I recall these things? you have heard them all; you know them all as I do. And if I refer to them at all, it is because I have ever striven to compel and to master circumstances, with the

full consciousness all the while that the circumstances would master me. What they had in store for me, I knew not ; what they may still have in store for me, I care not ; it is sufficient for me that I am the slave of destiny—you may call it predestination if you like—and that it will handle me as it willet. That is why I am contented as I am. And so should it be with you, Sir Neill. Sit still if you can, even if you are in the calm that is within the tornado ring of the cyclone."

"Again I say, Captain Stewart, that it is more easily said than done. I am so constituted that I cannot fold my hands and say 'Kismet !' I must meet events in the gate if I can. Besides, I am working for what I regard as a noble end, the creation of a higher condition of society among those with whom my lot is cast."

"And by all means work on. Fatalism is for results, not for causes. Fatalism is, after all, the solace when results turn out as we fear and not as we hope. Fatalism is but the narcotic that steepens the senses in oblivion. It is only for men when the world scowls on them, and when they see their schemes dissipated."

"Then it is not for me, Captain Stewart, at least not yet awhile. I must work on, though to tell the truth, everything seems to work against me."

"Explain yourself, pray, Sir Neill. How do events work against you."

"I am anxious to promote the well-being of the house of Montgomerie—the Montgomeries frown upon me. I would fain introduce an era of lasting peace and content between Eglinton and Glencairn—try as I may, I can accomplish nothing. I have maintained open friendship with Gabriel Montgomerie—he turns upon me and endeavours to set up my own kinsmen against me. I have given shelter to William Cuninghame of Robertland—he seeks to re-open the feud by forestalling the natural order of events. I try to hold the balance even—my daughter Anna places her hand on the scale, and tries to bring down the balance on the side of Robertland."

"Can that be so? How is Anna so affected towards the Cuninghames?"

"Not towards the Cuninghames, but towards a Cuninghame."

"I did not expect that, Sir Neill, but I see it without further explanation. It is but natural that her sympathies should be with the oppressed. It is woman-like, and I cannot cavil at it. But how has she shewn it?"

"I cannot say how she has shewn it, but I see it and feel it. It is implied in her look, in her tones, in her more than hatred of Gabriel Montgomerie, in her more than friendship for William Cuninghame. And if I mistake not, it is she who is impelling the young laird in his hopeless task to regain his own with the strong hand."

"Sir Neill Montgomerie, if your daughter Anna is impelling William Cuninghame to regain his own, the task he has set before him is not hopeless but hopeful. He will gain his end, you may depend upon it."

"Has Anna then over-matched you, Captain Stewart, as she has over-matched all upon whom she comes to exercise her woman-wit?"

"Anna has never thought it worth her while trying to over-master me; but if she had I should not care to be answerable for the result. But you may trust her. Your well-being at least is safe in her hands, and your honour will descend to its grave untarnished in so far as it is in her keeping."

"I do not doubt it. But that brings me back to where I was, to what I have already said. I am caught up on the back of circumstances. I am their victim, their slave, not their master."

"So are we all, Sir Neill; but do your duty and fear not, and yield yourself without fear to events. If you but labour for the higher ends you may, or you may not, have your reward here—in results—you will have it in a good conscience before God—and rest assured you will have your reward hereafter. Remember that you are helpless to stay any destiny, even your own. You may prepare the way for yourself, for the world that is beyond

the grave. But, as I have said, events will shape themselves ; and could you but see the end from the beginning you would see that the ultimate upshot makes for progress, and that the very darkness may be a necessary preliminary to the light that is to break."

And with such reasoning Captain Stewart endeavoured, and not without success, to reconcile Sir Neill Montgomerie to the inevitable."

CHAPTER XXII.

GABRIEL MONTGOMERIE TAKES A BOLD STEP.

EVENTS were waiting on the spring, and the spring was waiting on the sun. He came north at last. Far from the verge of the southern tropic he took his way, and o'er each of the three and twenty degrees that mark the domain of Capricorn he held steadily northwards. He reached the equator, and when he had passed it, the spring-time was fairly set in. Nature knew that it was, and she needed no telling. The winds knew it, for they blew softer and more gently than they had been doing, and the blasts of Boreas began to give way to the vernal zephyrs. The rains knew it, for they ceased to be cold and cheerless, and altogether wretched, and dropped their tribute in fructifying benevolence upon the earth. The flowers knew it, for deep in their dark little holes they began to send out their tiny sprouts, and to push their green twigs above the ground, and to get ready for their annual outing. The trees knew it, for the last of the withered leaves that had clung tenaciously to their parent all the long winter through, was pushed off by the coming leaves, and every branch was tingling with life to the very point. The grass knew it, for it grew greener, and thicker, and sweeter, and more tender. The birds knew it, for the robin began to doff his red waistcoat and fill his bosom with air and usher it

forth in song, the blackbird to warble his quick succession of notes in the copsewood, or as he disappeared over the wall, the sparrow to twitter, the chaffinch to get his strong pipe in order for the concert in which, of all the tree songsters, he was to take the leading part, and the lark to try his wings in the sunlight, and to rain down his notes dropping o'er the landscape like the song of a cherub in the heavenly choir. The birds of passage had not yet responded to the call ; but far away in their warmer clime and 'neath more generous skies, they were pluming their wings for flight, and their little hearts were swelling with ecstasy as they thought of the seas they were about to cross, and the broad lands they were to traverse ere beginning their domestic cares for the season. And man felt it, just as did the hedgerows, for he began to make ready to put forth his strength anew in anticipation of the harvest of the year. Even the cold mountains felt it, for they began to doff their snows and to soften the scaurs that the nakedness of winter had caused to stand out as clear as in the morning when they were first riven by the unseen might of the subterranean giants.

If you would see the country that God made, and not man, go visit it in the opening spring. You can see the towns and the cities which man made, and not God, at any time.

But leaving nature and her forces alone, and man and his cities, let us turn anew to the social life and strife I am endeavouring to unfold. Gabriel Montgomerie is still the warder of Robertland. The laird, the rightful owner, is still beyond the seas, and the young laird, in the strength of Kilmaurs, is laying his plans for the enterprise which is to place the home of his fathers in his possession, or undo him for ever.

Gabriel had many a scheme in his brain as the months passed on, and each seemed for the moment feasible and within easy reach of realisation. All, however, passed away and were forgotten ; and it remained for the spring days to evolve the most daring of his suggestions. Fear of William Cuninghame he had none. With his thirty men he could hold Robertland at

will. Its walls were strong ; strong were its gates ; staunch the fidelity of its defenders ; and Gabriel longed for nothing more than to man its battlements and speak with the enemy in the gate.

He was superior to open attack ; but there were forces, nevertheless, which led him captive at their will. Never would he forgotten the slight to which he had been subjected by Anna Montgomerie. Mortified vanity, fed by the inward preying of his baser feelings, took possession of him, and impelled him to a fresh and a daring enterprise. This was none other than the capture of the person of Anna. At first he shrank from the idea, then he looked at it, handled it gingerly, grasped it firmly, caressed it, nurtured it, and laid it to his heart. He did not seek to justify it ; but he had a conviction that, with Anna in his possession, he would be the unquestioned master of the situation. He could then dictate his own terms—to Sir Neill, who had ordered him hence from Lainshaw ; to Anna, who had spurned his advances ; to William Cuninghame, who would not risk one hair of her head, or place her life or her honour in jeopardy for all the acres of Robertland. What the ultimate gain was to be, the future must determine.

Gabriel knew that it was Anna's custom to ride each forenoon, alone, within the grounds of Lainshaw. A breezy gallop across the country was her daily stimulus. A splendid horsewoman, nothing gratified her more than to ride along the green lanes and by the hedgerows of the country side, or pay flying visits to the homes of the cottars and cottagers on the estate. And he resolved to lie in wait for her and carry her off.

Once the determination had taken firm hold upon his mind, he set about the carrying of it into effect. He told none of his followers what he meditated, but he called a select and trusted group of them to his aid, and went forth to make himself familiar with the contingencies. These were not serious. All he had to do was to secrete himself by the side of the way along which Anna had to pass on her return to Lainshaw, and carry her off.

And carry her off he did. All alone and thoughtless of danger, she was riding along a green lane mid-way between Lainshaw and Robertland, when out from a thicket dashed Gabriel and his men. Ere Anna had time to collect her energies or attempt to escape, Gabriel had seized her bridle rein, and he sat in his saddle facing her. Anna paled—she would have been less than woman had she maintained her composure—and then flushed from neck to forehead with indignation and anger. Eyeing Gabriel unflinchingly, she demanded—

“Why this indignity, Gabriel Montgomerie?”

Gabriel was too much excited, too consciously triumphant, and yet equally conscious that he was the author of an outrage, to meet even his captive on equal terms. He said nothing until Anna repeated her demand—

“Do you hear me speak, Gabriel? Why this outrage?”

And then he in turn flushed up to the roots of his hair, and he replied fiercely—

“You are my prisoner.”

“Your prisoner! Then spare me the indignity of being led captive. Let go the horse’s bridle rein.”

“When you are safe within Robertland—not till then. It is no use, Anna—you need say no more. For weal or for ill, right or wrong, you must accompany me. You can go willingly if you like, but willingly or unwillingly, you must go all the same.”

“Go willingly! Heaven forbid. Does the lamb go willingly to the fox’s den? Does the hare go willingly to the eyrie of the eagle? No; but if I must go, I shall go without putting you to the necessity of exercising brute force upon me. So leave me alone.”

“No, I cannot leave you alone; nor will I. You have too fleet a horse for that, Anna.”

“You cannot and you will not! You judge me by yourself. I know escape is hopeless. Were it not, I should resist you and

compel you to carry me off prisoner by force. But you are not the man, Gabriel, to give even a woman any advantage."

"You have said enough, Anna. It will be your own fault if you are subjected to any indignity. I intend to inflict none. But none the less I cannot give you opportunity even to attempt escape."

"Nor can you trust me to keep faith," replied Anna bitterly, yielding to the inevitable.

Gabriel gave the word to his escort, and the party—their fair captive in their midst—broke into a canter, and, without halting, continued on their way until they reached the house of Robertland.

Notwithstanding the circumstances, Anna had self-composure enough calmly to survey the situation. She did not trouble herself meanwhile with Gabriel's object in acting as he had done. Gabriel was too much the creature of his current emotions and aspirations to keep that long to himself. What concerned her most was the treatment she was likely to receive and the manner in which she should comport herself towards her captor. Should she speak with him at all? Should she not rather turn to him a deaf ear, and be as irresponsive as the Sphinx amid the sand dunes of far away Egypt? It was a tempting alternative, but she forebore to adopt any definite resolve, and waited upon events to determine for her what course she should pursue.

When the party dismounted at the hall door of Robertland, Anna ignoring Gabriel's proffers of assistance, Gabriel bid her enter. She obeyed. The Montgomerie retainers looked at her wonderingly; but Gabriel, with a jesture, bid them stand aside and withdraw their curiosity, and then summoned an old woman—the only woman who remained in service in the house—and instructed her to conduct Anna to rooms on one of the upper floors, and personally to wait upon her. The old woman, who for many years had served in Robertland, and who had known Cuninghames over whose graves the grass had grown green for half a century and more, eyed Anna wonderingly; but she was

too inured to the ups and downs of feudal life in North Ayrshire to feel more than a latent curiosity to know the meaning of the lady's advent at Robertland.

"I shall come to see you in the evening," said Gabriel; "till then you can compose yourself, and become reconciled to the situation. Bessie is not much of a lady's maid, I daresay, but she may do your turn."

Anna, who was by this time statuesque, as she was pale, in her demeanour, was about to follow the old woman, when, a second thought possessing her, she turned towards Gabriel.

"You will inform my father that I am here?" she said.

"Not I," answered Gabriel, "I'll do nothing of the kind."

"But you must; otherwise, not one word shall pass my lips while I remain in Robertland."

"We'll see to that," replied Gabriel. "A very likely story! I am to ride across to Lainshaw and tell your father that I have taken his child a prisoner? A very likely story, I say! I tell you I'll do nothing of the kind."

"Well then, Gabriel, I have said my last word to you within the walls of this house. Lead the way, Bessie, and I shall follow."

The old woman, whose eyes sparkled as she witnessed the temper of the captive, and who began to think she had a dim comprehension of the true state of matters, was about to comply with Anna's instructions when Gabriel checked her.

"Not yet; a moment, Bessie," he said. "You will not speak to me—will you not? We shall see to that before we have done with it. You are my prisoner, remember—though to what end God only knows. But being my prisoner, you must remember your position. You are not mistress of Robertland—remember that; and the more complaisant and compliant you are the better for all concerned."

Gabriel waited for reply, but none was forthcoming. Anna looked him full in the eyes, and Gabriel's fell. But only for an instant. Anger lent him fresh courage to renew the attack.

"Listen to me, Anna. You are my prisoner—my prisoner!—do you comprehend that? You are in my power—your life, your honour, your present, your future—all are in my power. You cannot afford to treat me otherwise than I desire, and intend to be treated; and it will be better for you, for your father, for all concerned, that you bear in constant mind that I am absolute and uncontrolled master of Robertland, from the topmost peak of it down to the foundation stone, and I am not to be thwarted either. There is no man within this house who dare disobey me, or would for a moment think to disobey me, and I am not to be contemned and treated cavalierly by a woman. You hear that?"

Anna heard, but she heard as though she heard him not. She only looked into his eyes without a quiver in her own. Her face remained pale, firm, statuesque.

There was a moment's silence. Gabriel would fain have heard her voice, but not more deaf to the cries of his devotees was the god of the Zidonians than was Anna to her captor.

"Bethink you, Anna," he resumed, still more passionately, but with an ill-affected assumption of calmness, "bethink you, I say, lest your obstinacy result in your undoing. What do I owe to you, that I should hasten to obey your slightest whim? You might have commanded me once, but not now. The opportunity you threw away, and now, when I have my opportunity, you think to accomplish your end by retaining silence? You think in vain. What do I owe you, I say? Nothing, less than nothing. And what do I owe to your father that I should forthwith communicate with him? As little as I owe to you. He has been a traitor to his own household. He has been false to the cause of Eglington. But for his wife—your mother, Anna—these troubles would never have befallen; and now, forsooth, you demand that I should inform him of your whereabouts, so that he may take steps to have you released. Flatter yourself with no such assumption, Anna. You are in my power, and, by the Immortal, you shall feel that you are ere you go hence."

While Gabriel was thus speaking, Anna listened, outwardly unmoved. Her eyes flashed fire when her captor taunted her with her father's treachery, and she would gladly have hurled back the false imputations with scorn. But she was firmly resolved on the course she had adopted to gain her immediate end, and she scorned to resile from it. She waited until he had finished, and then, turning to Bessie, remarked—

“We had better be going.”

Bessie looked towards Gabriel for instructions, but receiving none she hesitated for a moment and then moved slowly towards the door. There she paused, then opened the door deliberately, waited anew, and finally led the way from the room. Anna followed, closing the door behind her.

The apartments to which Anna was conducted were not by any means uncomfortable in themselves. As the times went, they were spacious and well furnished. The windows commanded an extensive view of the surrounding country. But to what purpose was the glory of the landscape to the captive within? Without, everything breathed of life and freedom; within, the four walls of the room were the boundaries of Anna's liberty.

Nevertheless, left to herself, she sat down by one of the windows and looked towards Lainshaw. She could not see it, but her heart, if not her eyes, abridged the distance, and in mental picture she beheld each weather-stained, memory-grained stone of her home. Within was her father, wondering at her absence, fearful lest mishap had overtaken her, waiting patiently for her return. For herself Anna scorned to weep. For her father, and her brothers and sisters, and for her home, she would fain have wept; but she was resolved that no tear should dim her eye, that no weeping should give Gabriel Montgomerie the momentary satisfaction of believing that he had tamed her spirit or cowed her resolution.

The sun was setting, and the shadows lengthening, when Gabriel knocked at the door of Anna's sitting-room. Again she

heard as if she heard not. She remained sitting where she was, her gaze on the country-side, her heart at Lainshaw, her resolution stronger than ever. Gabriel knocked a second time, and then a third; and then, obtaining no response, he opened the door and entered.

"Forgive me if I intrude," he said.

Whether Anna forgave him he had no means of knowing, for she took no notice of him.

"What!" he said, "still morose? I thought by this time your tongue would have been loosed, and that you would have been prepared to listen to reason; and yet you will not so much as condescend to tell me whether or not I intrude."

Anna turned round and faced her questioner. She lifted her eyes to his, and Gabriel noticed that they were calm and courageous, and that they neither fell before his gaze nor flinched by the drooping of an eye-lid when he looked into them.

"You will speak before you leave Robertland, Anna," Gabriel resumed, "but whether you speak now, or whether you forbear, you shall at least listen to what I have to say. And before I say aught further, I wish you to feel that you are entirely within my power. You are at my mercy—absolutely at my mercy. These castle-walls are not stronger than the hold I have upon you. There are nigh two score men in this house, and there is not one among them who would not obey my slightest wish. You are helpless, you are hopeless, and yet you refuse to open the door to hope, by obstinately refusing to speak with me? So be it. The hour is mine, not yours. The fault will be yours, not mine, if you are detained here; for you have it in your power to go hence if you but so will it."

Mayhap; but Anna neither spoke nor regarded. She set her face like a flint and remained silent.

"Yes, I say it is within your power to go hence. Cast your mind back, Anna, to the last time when you and I met with one another, with no one by. It was in your father's dining hall. I offered you my hand and you refused it. You held the future

in yours, and you would not grasp it. Hazlehead would have been yours, and Robertland, and the great feud would have been at an end."

Gabriel was romancing. Robertland was not his to bestow, though he had begun to look upon it in that light; and the roots of the blood-feud were stricken too deep in the soil to be withdrawn by the union of one Montgomerie with another, even although the one was a sympathiser rather with the cause of Glencairn than with that of the house whose name she bore. Anna could have torn his assumption to shreds, but she could not be withdrawn from the cave of silence into which she had voluntarily entered.

"You hear what I say? You despised me, you flung your opportunity to the winds, and now that you are my captive, you are paying but part of the price. And yet, as I have said, you may go hence if it so please you. But not unconditionally. It is I who must impose the conditions, not you. It is I who must dictate, not you. And yet, Anna, I would sue you—I, your captor—I would sue you. Not a hair of your head would I harm—I mean it, by all that is sacred. All the winter through, though you spurned me, though you imperiously ordered me to leave your father's dwelling, I have worshipped you at a distance. I can forgive all that is past, I can forget it, I can be as if there had been no remorseful past between us; and if you will but condescend to listen to my suit, to let the bygone be bygone, you will find that I too can allay all the hostile, angry feelings that have dominated me, and that I can give you the regard of a true man."

Anna had not withdrawn her eyes from those of Gabriel, but now she turned from him, a look of indignation on each feature of her face, and gazed into the darkening evening.

"What!" proceeded Gabriel, "untamed yet? By my soul, but you shall pay the price of your obstinacy."

Gabriel could not resist his rising passions, chasing one another across his perturbed mind, and his words were the

demonstration of the passion which for the moment was uppermost.

"The time was when you could afford so to act, when you could turn your back upon me with impunity ; but I am master here, remember that ! Think you that I can forget what you have done ? And yet, what right have I to expect aught else from the daughter of a murderess ?"

The words stung Anna from her inaction, but not out of her silence. She turned angrily on Gabriel, rose to her feet, a moment transfixed him with her impassioned gaze, and then, opening the door of her chamber, which adjoined, disappeared into the sanctuary which not even Gabriel would dare to desecrate, and which, to do him justice, Gabriel had no thought to desecrate.

It was a long, long night that followed—long to Anna, long to Gabriel, long to Sir Neill and the household of Lainshaw.

Anna threw herself upon her couch, but not to sleep. To face the situation as calmly as she could ; to lament the hard fate that was hers ; to fortify herself for the morrow, and for every morrow that must dawn upon her while she remained beneath the roof tree of Robertland ; to wonder whether her father would learn her whereabouts and what steps he would take to effect her liberation ; and to think that William Cuninghame was tardy in action. Why had he not acted upon the stimulus she had imparted to him ? He might have read her meaning more clearly than he had done. And yet, he was alone—not friendless—but unable to rally the Cuninghames to his call. He would have come if he could, and Anna pardoned the delay. But surely he had stimulus enough now ? Her thoughts travelled in quick succession. The hours passed slowly, the hours of the midnight and the darkness. Silence reigned without ; there was silence within—a silence that she felt. How oppressive it became ! And yet, why should she hope for the morning ? But that light is sweet, and it is a pleasant thing for the eyes to behold the sun.

Less enviable than Anna's mental lot was that of Gabriel Montgomerie. A conqueror and yet a slave. The conqueror of a woman; yet a slave to her. Worse still, the slave of his passions. Nor did he sleep. He was angry and vindictive, and gratified and reproachful by turns. What right had Anna to treat him as she had done? He could have borne reproach—but silence? absolute silence—he could not bear that. Anything was better than that. He could conquer reviling; he could revile again, if that were necessary; but to make his appeals to, or to triumph over a woman who only responded by looking calmly in his face—that was the crowning insult. She had no right to insult him. Who was she that she should treat a scion of the house of Eglinton as if she were a mute Oracle and he an unwelcome and unworthy worshipper at her shrine?

And yet, what harm could it have done him to have communicated what he had done, to her father? It would have shewn Sir Neill that he was not afraid of him. Afraid of him! Perish the very idea. Holding Anna captive, he held Sir Neill captive. But then, were he to give way, would not Anna be the conqueror? Anything rather than that.

Still, was it not a glorious capture he had made? Had he not wrought out a revenge worthy of the name? Had he not obtained compensation for the past—compensation and to spare? But to what end? If Anna remained wrapped up in her silence, to what purpose had he carried her off? She was obstinate—he did not hope to break down her resolution—had he not then miscalculated? And if he had, had he not made a mistake? He could not coerce her into speech—he did not expect to coerce her into speech—was he then the victor after all? A curse upon the whole proceeding!

And in thoughts like these the night passed to Gabriel, and the morning rose upon him more perplexed and more adversely wrought than when he had retired to bed, and not to rest.

CHAPTER XXIII.

REPULSED AT THE GATE OF ROBERTLAND.

WITH Sir Neill at Lainshaw was Captain Stewart of Ochiltree, and when Anna failed to return, the friends looked into one another's faces and wondered where she was and what was detaining her. The wonder deepened into anxiety, and then, as the sun went down, into alarm. A while Captain Stewart buoyed up Sir Neill with explanations which he hoped might turn out to be well-founded, and by hopes that were not meant to be realised; and after the search party had returned—for all round Lainshaw within a radius of five miles was scoured by careful searchers—he threw aside the laboured explanations and the false hopes, and spoke out what he thought.

"You are not a man, Sir Neill, to yield to despair or be fearful to realise the truth. Now, tell me where do you think Anna is—honestly and sincerely?"

"For the life of me, I cannot say," replied Sir Neill.

"Have you no idea?"

"Not the slightest."

"No suspicion?"

"Not a suspicion. If I knew where she was I might be able to find her."

"You might know where she was and yet be unable to find her. But think, Sir Neill, can you not fathom this mystery?"

"It cannot be," and Sir Neill sunk his voice as he spoke, "that she has gone to visit her mother, and that watchers have traced her going, and——"

"No, no, Anna would never put herself, not to say her mother, in such a predicament. She has wisdom beyond her years and the discretion of a thoughtful man. You must think again."

"It is no use thinking. What good is it to think when I can-

not fathom the mystery by any cogitation? If you know where she is, Captain Stewart, do not hide it."

"I do not know where she is, but I have a strong suspicion, and it amounts almost to a certainty in my mind, that she is not very far distant. Far enough, though, if there are thick walls and heavy gates between her and freedom."

"You alarm me, Captain Stewart. Do not keep me in suspense. What do you think has happened to my daughter?"

"Before I tell you what I think, promise me that you will not act this night on what I say. Remember, it is only a belief that is in my mind—a strong belief, but only a belief; and if it should prove to be ill-founded you would do more harm than good by setting forth on a quest whither I shall indicate."

"I promise, because I trust your judgment. You would not bid me promise had you not good reason for it."

"I have good reason. Nothing could be gained by the quest—perhaps less than nothing. Evil would in all probability eventuate."

"I have promised, and that is enough. What has become of Anna?"

"Remember, I only express my belief."

"Well, what is your belief?"

"That she has been stolen."

"Stolen! By whom? Who would dare——"

"Gabriel Montgomerie."

"By heavens, Captain Stewart, but I believe you are right. Gabriel is the very man for the deed. But whereon do you found your suspicions?"

"On Gabriel Montgomerie's character, on his actions, on his threats, on his animosity towards you personally, on his wounded pride and mortified vanity. He has been seeking his revenge, and now he has found it."

"But what can be his motive?"

"Motive! Gabriel, if I comprehend him aright, never has a consistent motive; and that is where the difficulty of accounting

for his conduct lies. He has no guiding principle, except hatred of the Cuninghames, and that is not a principle. It is a passion. It has seized him and become part of his nature, and he sees everything in the light of the passion."

"But what can he hope to gain?"

"Probably he has some misty idea in his brain that he will win Anna herself, that she will yield to her fears what she would never yield to his pleadings."

"But Anna would die first. She has no fears. Gabriel might as well try to bend the father of the forest as bend her will to his."

"True; and that makes the position in one sense the more hopeful. Her person is safe—give yourself no anxiety on that point—and her life is safe. On the other hand, her firmness and strength, if they do not break down and overcome Gabriel's obstinacy, are certain to strengthen it. Having taken a wrong step, if he do not hasten to undo it, he will justify his determination to perpetuate it."

"Then something must be done at once. I cannot sit here idle and let the struggle go on."

"Nothing can be done to-night. We are discussing a hypothesis. Gabriel may not be the offender at all, for all we know."

"But I do know," replied Sir Neill, possessed with the truth that Captain Stewart had ventured to suggest; "I am certain as I sit here that Gabriel is the offender."

"Well, even if he is, I say nothing can be done to-night. It will be time enough to discuss the future to-morrow, when we are satisfied that Anna cannot return, and when we may assure ourselves that our suspicions do not belie the truth."

With such bare consolation Sir Neill had, perforce, to be content. He could say nothing further; and night is the time for repose.

Repose! What repose for a father robbed of his daughter? Repose for the humble cotman in his wayside hut. Repose for

the labourer weary with his day's toil. Repose for them who dwelt in the tents of peace. But for Sir Neill, no repose.

For when all was silent in Lainshaw, he softly left the house, and, as quietly as he could, led forth a horse from the stables; and he mounted on the horse's back, and beneath the gloom of the vault over his head, he took his way towards Robertland. Night above—darkness—all-stretching, all-circling—relieved alone by the glimmer of the stars. Night within him, and only the star of hope arising in his mind. Night all round—slumbering the woodland and the fields, and the hill-sides, and the hedgerows, the birds in the groves, and the herds on the braes. Night in his soul—oh for the break of day and the fleeing of the shadows!

Sir Neill rode slowly. He had not heart enough to give his horse rein, or whip, or spur. He did not hope to bring Anna back with him—all he wished was to look upon the walls of Robertland. Perchance he might see something?

And bye-and-bye there rose up in front of him the house of Robertland. As Sir Neill had come within ear-shot of the castle, he had tied his horse to a tree, and he approached on foot. The castle was wrapped in gloom. All silent it piled itself up against the dark background of the trees and the sky beyond them. So calm and serene was it, that it looked liker Nature's handiwork than man's.

Dark, too, was the keep—not one faint glimmer to strike into the gloom. Why, it looked like a tower of silence, like a grand mausoleum, tenanted by those who should awake no more. Round and round the house Sir Neill wandered, but the something he hoped to see was nowhere to be seen.

But stay. Away up yonder where the castle struck into the sky line, there was a glimmer. It was faint, so faint that it had escaped his notice. It hardly shone out into the darkness; it was but the dim reflection of relieved darkness within—a stray beam upon the gloom of the environment. But it was more than that—it was a ray of hope. Upon whom did the faint

light within shine? Was it upon Anna? Was she the captive in that upper chamber, far from freedom, with the heavy massive walls between her and her father? Sir Neill would fain have annihilated the intervening space; but that was more than unaided mortal could accomplish; and after gazing again and again at the still lingering ray, he sadly retraced his steps, as sadly remounted his horse, and went back in his sorrow to Lainshaw.

And as he looked at his fate and saw the future thicken in its gloom in the darkness of the present, he despondingly soliloquised, in thought if not in word—"My wife is not, and Anna is not—all these things are against me."

The light of the spring morning brought back to Sir Neill Montgomerie some measure of his resolution, and he greeted Captain Stewart more cheerily than might have been expected of one who had wandered far from home in the silent watches of the night.

"What cheer comes with the morning, Captain Stewart?"

"The cheer of the morning itself. It is a morn full of good augury," replied Captain Stewart. "The sun shines upon our hopes."

"So shines it upon the schemes of the wrong-doer; the unjust as well as the just."

"That is true, Sir Neill, as it has been from the beginning. I often think how careless Nature is of her children, and how little she is affected by the strifes of men. The sun rises as bright upon the poor wretch who is being led forth to his doom as it does upon the hero of the day; upon the beggar who sits by the rich man's gate, as upon the monarch upon his throne. But I am myself destroying the omen. The sun shines upon us, I tell you. Let us be thankful for the hope."

"But," replied Sir Neill, "it shines too upon Robertland, if indeed it be there that Anna has found captivity."

"So it does; but who knows what healing it has in its beams to the captive? But come, Sir Neill, let us consider what is to

be done. I have been thinking over the situation, and I'll tell you to what purpose. One of two things we must do this very day. You must either ride as far as Eglinton, far as it is, and see the Master, and bid him come hither at once, to command Gabriel to give Anna her freedom ; or you must go to Kilmaurs and invoke the aid of the Earl of Glencairn."

"I cannot go to Kilmaurs. I cannot ask a Cuninghame to aid me against a Montgomerie. God forbid that I should take part with the Cuninghames against my own flesh and blood !"

"Well, there is a third alternative, and it is the one I should first have suggested. As yet, we have no reason to conclude where Anna is. She may not be at Robertland after all. So, by your leave, we shall even ride across as far as Robertland, and ask Gabriel Montgomerie himself. He will not lie to us."

"No, Gabriel will not lie. He has faults and to spare, but he is not afraid to speak the truth, if he speak at all. But is there no danger ?"

"Danger, Sir Neill ! What do you mean by danger ?"

"Danger to you. Danger that we may defeat our own project by seeking interview with Gabriel at all. I did not refer to bodily danger—I have outlived that fear. And as for you——"

"I think I have outlived it too. Still, I love life, and would not willingly throw it away. But I anticipate no danger of that description. Gabriel may order us hence—in all probability he will—but he will never lay violent hands upon us."

"Well, then, I am ready for the journey. If we are to go at all, we cannot afford to lose time."

Across to Robertland, accordingly, rode Sir Neill and Captain Stewart. They were hailed as they approached, by the warder, and bidden remain at a distance from the house ; for Gabriel had ordered that no one should have admission without his knowledge and consent. Halting, they waited until Gabriel himself should appear.

Nor had they long to tarry. Gabriel acted as usual on the spur of the moment, and emerging from the gate, he joined him-

self to their company. His brow was overcast, his face haggard, he had all the appearance of one to whom Morpheus had denied his arms, as indeed he had.

"You were not wont," said Sir Neill, who at once took up the conversation, "you were not wont, Gabriel, thus to keep your friends at a distance from your door?"

"Nor am I now," replied Gabriel, frowning as he spoke, and placing himself in an attitude that betokened calculated obstinacy. "Nor am I now, but I first must know who my friends are, and who my enemies. In what capacity do you come?"

"That I cannot yet say. I have striven to be your friend, though you have tried my friendship sorely, and misinterpreted my efforts towards your welfare. I am willing to be your friend yet, provided—

"Provided what?"

"You have not robbed me of my daughter."

"And if I have?"

"Then I am your friend no longer."

"But if I have not?"

"Then I entertain an unjust suspicion concerning you."

"And if I refuse to speak further with you and to give you any information, what then?"

"Then I shall have to assume that you have done as I fear, and I shall be your enemy."

"By what right, Sir Neill, do you thus come to question me? Why should I not turn from you? I owe you nothing."

"Nothing! You owe me nothing, Gabriel! Do you not owe me the person of my daughter?"

"I refuse to give you any information, Sir Neill. You come hither and threaten me with your enmity unless I give you a certain reply to your questions; and you think to terrify me into submission with a threat?"

"I have used no threats. I never threaten, Sir, and I never shall; but I have a right to question you concerning Anna."

"A right!"

"Yes, Gabriel Montgomerie, a right. The right of a father to search for his child. You have taken her from me!"

"I have not said so."

"You have not denied it."

"Nor shall I deny it. I have only declined to be questioned by you concerning any action whatever of mine. My deeds are my own, and I alone am responsible for them, not you."

"No, I claim no responsibility for them. Thank heaven, the responsibility is your own and not mine. But you must answer me, Gabriel. You cannot keep me in the dark."

"Cannot?"

"No, you cannot. You have no right to do it. Have you not heart enough to feel for the position of a father robbed of his child?"

"Heart! who talks of hearts? Why should I grow sentimental because you are stricken? Have you ever been so careful of my feelings? I have not forgotten how you ordered me like a dog out of your dwelling, and how your daughter emphasised your command."

"I had good cause to order you from my dwelling, as you very well know. But even if I had wronged you, have you acted the part of a wise man in stealing my daughter?"

"I have not admitted stealing your daughter."

"But you have, Sir, you have stolen her. She is even now in this house of Robertland. If I have ever wronged you, Gabriel, you should be magnanimous enough to forget what I have done. Tell me, I beseech you to tell me, Gabriel, have you made Anna your prisoner?"

"And if I have?"

"If you have it is not yet too late to undo the wrong you have done. Have you no conscience that tells you that you have sinned in so acting, sinned against me, sinned against my daughter, sinned against your own conscience, sinned, Gabriel, against your God? Have you no fear of Him?"

"Never mind that—leave me alone to answer to my Maker if

answer I must. It is with you I have to deal in this world, not with Him."

"Have you no lurking depth of pity in your soul then, Gabriel?"

"Aye, pity for those who have pity for me, none for aught others."

"You must then bear the consequences. But why should you perpetuate wrong? Bring Anna forth to me, and I shall go my way, and I promise you, Gabriel, that I shall let the byegone be byegone."

"It is too late."

"It is never too late to forget or forgive. But I must go to Anna if she cannot come to me."

Sir Neill, as he spoke, was about to urge his horse forward towards the house, but Gabriel, seeing his intention, stepped in front, and Captain Stewart at the same moment laid his hand upon his arm.

"You cannot pass this way, Sir Neill. Robertland is my possession, meanwhile, and I shall be master of my own, and if you dare proceed further, you do so at the peril of your own life."

"I care not," replied Sir Neill. "I must go to my daughter."

"Cease awhile," interposed Captain Stewart. "Harkee, sir," he continued addressing Gabriel, "will you listen a moment while I speak?"

"If you have aught to say that concerns me, sir," replied Gabriel, "I am at your service. But to whom do I speak?"

"You know my name; I am Captain Stewart of Ochiltree."

"You were not ever Captain Stewart of Ochiltree. There hangs a mystery over you, the folks say, and ere I hold converse with you, I want to know that I am addressing Captain Stewart and none other."

Captain Stewart frowned, and his countenance darkened into a reserve of dignity.

"Captain Stewart I am," he replied, "and none other; and Captain Stewart I shall remain till the close of the chapter. What I was, matters not to you. You have naught to do with

my past. But what can it matter to you who or what I am, or who and what I was? I have not come here to talk of myself; and shall it be said, sir, that you refused to listen to the measured words of an Ayrshire gentleman?"

Gabriel would have retorted angrily, but he looked into Captain Stewart's eyes and he could not read their depths, so he shrugged his shoulders as he replied—

"As you like. I care not who you are—what have you to say?"

"You are the warder of Robertland, and you hold it for and in name of the Master of Eglinton," replied Captain Stewart.

"You are not at war with the Montgomeries, are you?"

"I am a Montgomerie," returned Gabriel, proudly.

"You are. A house divided against itself cannot stand. You cannot have been dictated in your actions—I assume that Anna Cuninghame is in your keeping—by hostility to the cause of Eglinton?"

"I have given you no reason to assume any such thing, and I am not hostile to my friends."

"I have not said you have my friend's daughter captive, though, if you have not, it would be easy to deny it and bring this interview to a close. Besides, you evinced no surprise when you heard that Anna had gone amissing, and there is ample reason, therefore, to assume that you are cognisant of her whereabouts."

"Well?"

"Well, have you any reason to think you are in any way advancing the interest of him who sent you hither, and who trusted this house to your keeping, in stirring up strife with Sir Neill Montgomerie of Lainshaw?"

"It was not I who stirred up strife."

"That is not as I am informed."

"Probably not, but it is as I am informed."

"Is it not the case that you have striven to rekindle the feud,

and endeavoured to make the assassination of the Earl of Glencairn the alternative to winning the hand of Anna Montgomerie?"

"I have done nothing that may not become a Montgomerie," retorted Gabriel, haughtily; "and you, sir, have no right to question either my motives or my intentions. I am not beholden to you."

"No, but you are beholden to your duty and to the cause of righteousness and justice. Believe me, I have no wish to recall the past. I have referred to it, only to show that your motives are known and that you have put the family honour in jeopardy for your own selfish ends. Nay, you need not frown upon me—I care nothing for your frowns."

"Nor I for your sermonising. Get you hence if you have nothing more palatable to urge. I have had enough of this interview."

"Then you refuse to give up your captive?"

"I refuse, and absolutely, to have any further dealings with you."

"On your head, then, be the responsibility."

"So be it, sir; and hark, Sir Neill—you want your daughter?"

"I do."

"Then you must come and take her."

And with these words Gabriel returned to Robertland, and the gate was shut.

CHAPTER XXIV.

NO ESCAPE FOR A MONTGOMERIE.

GABRIEL was not a strong enough man to obey his conscience when his will dictated an opposing line of conduct. His conscience tried to tell him that he was doing wrong in confining Anna a captive in Robertland, but he beat it down.

It never had an opportunity to raise a warning voice—he prevented its speaking altogether. The most the inward monitor could do was to get in a suggestion side-ways, that Gabriel was doing wrong; but he shut out the suggestion, and he shut down the conscience; and that was the end of it for the present. The conscience went to sleep—probably to waken again, like a giant refreshed—and Gabriel set about the erection of an independent wall of justification of his own conduct.

Common-sense tried to tell him that he was doing wrong, and that he could gain no worthy end in continuing any longer in wrong-doing. And if he had only thought of it, he would have seen that common-sense was right. He had no clearly defined motive in retaining the captive. Satisfaction, of a kind, was his; but it was only the satisfaction of having got the better of Anna Montgomerie, and of troubling and annoying Sir Neill, her father. If these had been his objects, he had obtained them.

What need, then, was there to keep Anna any longer a prisoner? The need of a man who has done wrong, who knows he has done wrong, but who has neither the courage to admit it, nor the greater courage to undo it. If he would not undo the evil he must perpetuate it. And perpetuate it, Gabriel resolved to do.

When Captain Stewart and Sir Neill had ridden away—slowly and sorrowfully enough—Gabriel bethought himself that he would revisit Anna in the upper room which he had placed at her disposal—or rather at whose disposal he had placed the fair captive. She would speak now, he told himself. He had as good as told her father that she was in Robertland. He had bid him come and take her if he could, and that was equivalent to saying she was there. She had no excuse to maintain her rigid silence longer, and if he could not have the satisfaction of hearing from her own lips that she accepted his conditions, he could at least have the lesser gratification of hearing her denounce him. And even that was better than nothing.

Upstairs, accordingly, Gabriel went. He knocked at the door,

and then, receiving no response, he opened it slowly and entered. Anna was sitting by the window, just as he had seen her the previous night. She was unchanged. Her face was as calm as ever, her eyes as steady. If she was a trifle paler, he failed to notice it. Could it be that, after he had retired the evening previous, she had returned to that seat by the window, and remained there ever since? It looked like it.

Gabriel felt a twinge of pity for her—she looked so desolate, yet so calm. But then, was her calmness not an irritant in itself; an evidence that she still despised and condemned him? He might as well feel pity for the Sphinx looking out across the centuries. So he banished the twinge of pity, and bid Anna good morning.

She paid no heed to his greeting.

"I thought as much, I expected as much," he grumbled, "but, if you are to keep your word, you will speak to me now. Your father knows you are here."

Anna raised her eyes to his and broke silence.

"You have told him?" she asked, in those calm accents of hers that Gabriel liked least because they suggested most.

"Well, not exactly," replied Gabriel, "but he knows. He has been here looking for you, and I have bidden him come and take you away if he can."

"Then I have not to thank you for my father's knowledge of my whereabouts?"

"Yes you have. I might have said you were not here, or that I knew nothing of your whereabouts."

"Yes, you might have lied."

"No, I might not have lied," he retorted. "I have never lied, and no man living would dare to say what you have said. I have the courage of my own deeds and words; and I shall not stoop to falsehood now."

"Yet you are false to yourself. You need not that I should tell you so—for you know it."

"No, I am true to myself now, as I have ever been true. I

have not sought to evade responsibility for aught that I have ever done. My deeds are in the face of day."

"But you are none the less false to yourself. You have brought me hither—was it like a true man to carry off a helpless woman when she suspected no danger?—you have brought me hither, I say, without worthy motive. You have given yourself up to the one domineering passion for petty vengeance, without thought, without serious intent, without knowing what is to be the result, or what you are to gain by retaining me your prisoner. What have you to gain by it? Have you anything?"

"You are not my father confessor, Anna. I justify myself, and that is enough for me."

"But you cannot justify yourself, and therein I say you are false to yourself. But to what do I owe your visit this morning?"

"To what should you owe my visit but to a desire to see you and to talk with you?"

"If seeing me can do you any good, I have no doubt you will gratify your wish without consulting me; but why you should wish to hear me talk when our views and our sympathies are as wide asunder as the poles, is more than I can comprehend. I cannot pretend to meet you on friendly terms, nor will I pretend it. I have been too long free to take kindly to being a captive, least of all your captive."

"But my captive you are, nevertheless, and here you remain until I open the doors and bid you go free. So you had better reconcile yourself to your captivity."

"I would appeal to you, Gabriel, if I thought you had a heart—I would appeal to you for the sake of my father and for my sisters and brothers at home. Not for my own sake. I would rather die in Robertland than kneel to beg the mercy of freedom at your hands."

And Anna looked as if she meant it; as in truth she did. Gabriel could not help admiring his captive. She was the soul of independence itself. Not she the woman to beat her breast out like some silly bird on the bars of her prison; but the woman

to take her fate with the mysterious calmness of the stoic. But though he admired Anna, he was not to fall a prey to his admiration of her ; he was anxious rather to discover some common ground on which they could converse. Common ground ! There was none. Not more diverse fire and water in their constituents than the two Montgomeries facing each other in the upper room of Robertland.

"Yet you can have your freedom if you desire it," was all that Gabriel could say ; "once you scorned me, once you turned a deaf ear to me, and were I to treat you as I might, I should give you silence enough during your stay in Robertland ; but, Anna, you must listen anew to my suit. I will have no refusal. I will not be treated as you have treated me. I have a right to urge my wooing."

"Right ! You may have the right of the barbarian to the captive whom he waylays and carries to his hut ; the right of the fox to the lamb or the kid it has stolen ; but you have no right to make your suit to me. You may keep me captive, but my will is beyond you. You cannot chain that, you cannot bend it to your will. God has made it free, and free it will remain till the close of the day."

"Ah ! you say so now, but time will try the strength of your resolution, Anna."

"Time will come and time will go, but it never can and never shall bend my heart or my affections towards you. I should scorn to accept freedom were such the alternative, and there is no earthly power that can compel me to act here in one iota otherwise than I myself shall determine."

"Why, what have you to fear ? I offer you myself, with what position and what power I have to give. I offer to devote myself to you so long as I live."

"Cease, cease, Gabriel. You waste your breath when you so speak to me. Can you not comprehend what I say plainly ? Must I say it again ? I cannot, I will not listen to your proposals. I have no words potent enough to tell the utter detesta-

tion I feel for them ; and you might as well call upon the winds of the sea to stay their flight and hope that they should obey you, as hope to turn me from my course. My decision is irrevocable. I am your captive—I am not, and never can be your slave ; and henceforth when you speak to me within this house of Robertland your voice will be as that of one who cries in the wilderness.”

“Bethink you, Anna, what you say. You dare me too far. Can you expect that I should hearken to such language as yours, and then open the doors and bid you depart ?”

Anna was as one who hearkened not, neither regarded. She turned to the window, and her eye wandered over the country beneath. She felt Gabriel's presence ; she knew that he was there watching her as the eagle its quarry ; she knew the devil that was in him, and that he was capable of the angriest impulses ; she knew that he was the one potent force, the unquestioned one-man power that ruled the destinies of the moment—and yet she looked over the landscape as calmly as if she were admiring its beauties with mind open to its sympathies. Behind her raged the human storm. She could not see it. She heard it in the deep respirations that indicated the internal tempest. It surged beside her. But, without, the sun smiled on Nature, and Nature back to the sun, and she felt that He whose voice breathed in the gentlest zephyr that ever blew was more potent far than any earthly power. These—the trees and the fields and the hill slopes, the sun in the sky and the sky itself—were but the hidings of His power—the depth of His omnipotence who could understand ? Not Gabriel Montgomerie.

Gabriel would fain have spoken, but what could he say ? Words rose to his lips—of threat, of warning, of execration—but, mastering himself for once, the captor left the captive victress and stole silently out of the room. Not to undo the wrong he had done, but to steel his heart in continuance of the wrongdoing.

For the next three days Anna saw no one save her attendant,

the superannuated Bessie. Bessie looked like a slab out of the history of Robertland. All her life long the precincts of the castle had known her. She felt herself part and parcel of its history, of its very existence. When the Montgomeries came down upon it she never thought of running away, any more than did the corner stone. Run away! Forsake the dwelling that had sheltered her for more than three quarters of a century! Bessie never thought such a thing possible. Was she not the one connecting link between the past and the present? And was she to sever the connecting link and destroy the chain of continuity? Why, she remembered talking with men who had ridden away a century ago to do battle with the Montgomeries, and to deluge the plains of North Ayrshire with blood. She had known the men who had fired castles and cots, and seen the night sky redden to its baleful story.

Gabriel, when he took Robertland into his keeping, had need of drudges; and Bessie, old as she was, was capable of doing something. Very little. So little that Gabriel had thought of turning her adrift. But there entered into his heart a ray of weakness, and for the sake of the old woman's great age and her helplessness, he had permitted her to remain. And now he was rewarded by being able to give Bessie to his captive, to Anna Montgomerie, as an attendant.

Anna knew the old woman, and had known her all her life. Bessie too knew Anna—she was an old woman when Anna was born. There was a great gulf between them. Not the gulf of years—that was deep enough and broad enough. Not the gulf of social status and rank—deep enough and broad enough as well. A gulf deeper than these, wrought out by the feudal hates and loves of the Cuninghames. Anna was a Montgomerie. Bessie had never known well of a Montgomerie. Her mother was a Cuninghame! Aye, so she was, but her father was a Montgomerie, and she bore her father's name, and her father's blood coursed in her veins. Her mother had instigated to a

great revenge, executed by the Cuninghames—aye, so she had, but Anna was still Anna Montgomerie, not Anna Cuninghame !

Bessie was garrulous enough to the captive, for whom, notwithstanding the dark blot of her surname, she entertained a certain feeling akin to pity. So garrulous was she that Anna, who had not sufficient time to know her and to study her character, set her down as a stupid old woman, superannuated in mind as in body, and with only as much care for the weal of the Cuninghames as was consistent with selfishness enough for her own well-being. She misread Bessie, for Bessie would have died for the Cuninghames.

Anna thought to win her confidence, and if possible to enlist her services, but she had not faith enough for the attempt. Nevertheless, she lost no opportunity to converse with the old woman and to win her regard.

"Is your memory good, Bessie?" she asked the old woman one evening.

"No," replied Bessie, "it's beginnin' tae fail. Fu' weel I min' what took place lang syne when I was a bairn, but between that time and the noo, I'm whiles in a glamour. I see things through a mist, ye ken, an' they stan' oot kin' o' blurred an' indistinct, like rocks an' trees in a fog. It's only when I gae back tae the verra beginnin' that ilka thing's as clear as it sud be."

"I've heard them say that you remember the burning of Eglinton Castle, Bessie—can that be true?"

"Na, na, my bonny young lady, they lee wha say that. Eglinton Castle bleezed ere I cam intae the warl'; but I mind them that saw't bleeze fine, an' mony's the time I've heard them tell the story. If it hadna been for that, there wad hae been less trouble the day; an' yet, what can there be but trouble in this world? Man is born tae trouble, ye ken, as the sparks fly upward."

"You must tell me the story, Bessie, as you heard it from the lips of those who took part in it."

"Aye, aye, cauld enough lips noo. Tae think that they were

ance as red an' rosy as yours! This fifty years they've been in the kirkyard. But the story—ye said ye wantit that. It's like a dream tae me noo. Ye ken the Montgomeries and the Cuninghames hae been at war thae twa or three hunner year. Naebody can tell what it began aboot—only I ken this muckle, that the Montgomeries were in the wrang frae the verra start, as they are tae this day—forgie me for sayin' sae tae ane o' them. Weel, they had been killin' ane anither a while, here and there, at an odd time like, an' the Montgomeries thocht they wad hae a big revenge. Sae ae day they went doon tae Kerelaw—I've never been there, but it stan's near by the sea—and attacked it when the laird an' his men were frae hame, an', as ye micht expect, they sacked it and burned it tae the grun'. The Cuninghames werena lang in vowin' vengeance, but somehoo or ither they never managed it till twa or three years had been wasted, an' they michtna hae managed it even then, but for the laird o' Auchinharvie bein' slain by the Earl of Eglinton, an' then, richt on his heels, Archibald o' Waterstoun. The double murder stirred the blood in the Master o' Glencairn, an' he ca'ed in his men frae ilk part, here an' far awa'. In Robertland he slept ere he went forward tae his revenge, and the auld rafters rang that nicht wi' curses against the Montgomeries. The next day—a fine day in the back end of the year—the harvest was bein' taken in—the Cuninghames met oot there in the park an' took their departure. In eight an' forty hours they returned. I tell ye, Miss, they were grimy an' grey wi' bluid an' smoke. They had stood aneath the walls o' mony a cot an' mansion when the red fire rose ower their heads; an' some o' them had got their hair singed an' their claes burned wi' the embers o' Eglinton Castle itself! Ah, they said it was a bonnie bleeze! The win' whirled the fire an' the smoke aboot sae that at times it was wrapped up, ye ken, in darkness, an' then the flames wad burst oot through the smoke an' clouds o' sparks wad flee intae the air, and the heat was sae great that the Cuninghames had tae fa' back for shelter tae the trees in the park. An' what a roarin' o' the

flames there was, an' a crash when the floors gaed doon—Miss, they said it was like a wee hell. An' frae Lainshaw tae the Lugton, and frae that doon to Ardrossan, they left not a standin' stane that cam' in their way. I tell ye their swords were red wi' bluid as weel, an' their han's, an' their faces, an' there was a wild joy in their een that made them shine an' glare like a wheen balefires. That's the story, as I heard it frae them wha took part in the raid. The auld Laird o' Robertland was ane o' the foremost an' the frackest in the fray, an' the knocks are on his sword to this 'oor."

"The Lord forgive them!" ejaculated Anna, as the old woman closed her tale.

"Aye, the Lord forgive the Montgomeries for a' the ill they have done tae the hoose o' Glencairn!" said Bessie.

"The Lord forgive them all, Montgomeries and Cuninghames alike!" added Anna. With which invocation Bessie could not but agree, save and except that she mentally made the reservation that the Montgomeries had much more need of forgiveness than ever the Cuninghames had.

"Yer mither, ye telt me, was a daughter o' the auld Laird o' Aiket?"

"She was."

"I mind her weel when she was a lassie—a braw lass an' a comely. Ye said yer name was Anna—did ye no?"

"Yes."

"A Cuninghame name. Listen, an' I'll tell ye a queer thocht that cam' intae my mind."

As she spoke Bessie's eyes flashed into life. Age had wrinkled her, age had bent her, age had taken the colour from her cheeks, and the strength from her limbs; age had transformed her raven hair to winter, but it had not taken the depth, the intensity, the brightness, from her eyes. Anna felt eerie in her presence, for she came near to her, and laid her hand upon her, and transfixed her with her gaze, and sunk her cracked voice into a whisper.

"Anna—Anna Cuninghame?"

"No—Anna Montgomerie."

Bessie a moment relaxed her hold, but renewing it instantly she proceeded—

"Ye're a grand-daughter o' Aiket?"

"I am."

"Then, beware o' Gabriel Montgomerie o' Hazlehead. It's a name o' ill omen."

Anna looked at the old woman searchingly. She was all mystery. Some hidden memory of the long ago was upon her.

"Aye," repeated Bessie, "min' what I say. Ye hae heard tell o' the bride o' Aiket. She sinned in gaein' her hand an' her heart to anither Gabriel o' Hazlehead—his body's in the grave lang syne. He went awa' tae the wars and she was forced by her parents tae accept anither lover. Ere Gabriel left she plighted her troth tae him in life, and in death—in death, Miss—in death. She broke her troth—she could'na help it, the brave lassie, though she sinned in haein' ocht tae dae wi' a Montgomerie, an' though they tell me these were the days before the feud. She broke her troth, I say, an' wedded anither man. Gabriel Montgomerie was killed that very day, an' at midnight he cam intae the great hall o' Aiket. He was in armour frae head tae feet—black armour, an' his een shone like wildfire—an' he lifted Anna up in his arms and carried her aff. Frae that day tae this she has never been seen in the flesh, but"—and Bessie sunk her voice still lower—"I kenned a man wha saw her. She was lyin' across the saddle o' a black horse, in front o' a knight in armour, an' they passed like a vision o' the nicht."

"I have heard the story, Bessie, but I do not need your warning."

"Gabriel Montgomerie, he is here—here in this house—an' you are a Cuninghame o' Aiket—Anna Cuninghame too!"

"No, Anna Montgomerie of Lainshaw."

"Aye, aye, I forgot, but beware o' him for a' that."

"I am not likely to do aught else than beware of him."

"If you were but a Cuninghame an' no a Montgomerie!" sighed Bessie, speaking partly to herself.

"And if I were—what then?"

"I could tell you something—but never mind. Ye are a Montgomerie, an' ye maun dree yer weird."

With which consolatory answer Bessie withdrew herself from the apartment and hirlped away.

Left alone Anna bethought herself what the old woman could mean. If she had been a Cuninghame and not a Montgomerie, Bessie could have done something? Was she the custodier of some mystery about Robertland unknown to the Montgomeries? Was she the guardian of some secret passage, some hidden staircase that might lead her out and away to freedom and to life beyond the enforced gloom of her captivity? Anna knew there were such exits—by panels that opened with a spring in the wainscoting, and, by devious masonry and much device of turning and twisting, conducted those familiar with them out into the open; staircases within the central pillar, around which the grand staircase of the house wound upwards, which ran away beneath the ground to subterraneous passages opening at a distance from the house in some deep hollow concealed artfully by underbrush and shrubbery from the eyes of the curious. If Bessie were in possession of any such secret, why should she not attempt to avail herself of it? It was worth trying at any rate.

And try Anna did—and with this result.

"Bessie," she said, as the old woman re-entered the room, putting her question directly, "is there no secret passage in Robertland?"

"None," replied Bessie, "none for a Montgomerie."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE LORD OF KILMAURS IS SUSPICIOUS.

WHITHER should they turn—to the Earl of Glencairn or to the Master of Eglinton? That was the question that Sir Neill Montgomerie and Captain Stewart were discussing. They had returned from Robertland—Sir Neill downcast and angry, Captain Stewart thoughtful; and walking together amid the surroundings of Lainshaw they held converse the one with the other.

“What’s the good of talking of the necessity for maintaining peace? Gabriel Montgomerie has no right to have peace, and I have no time to wait while negotiations are going on. I say I must have Anna, and that at once.”

“Pray, Sir Neill, try even in this hour of trial to remember the principles you profess. If they are good enough for the calm they are good enough for the storm. Besides, I fail to see that you are more likely to attain your object by overt acts any the sooner. Who will fight your battle?”

“Sir Neill Montgomerie,” proudly replied that individual himself, “will not want for men to fight his battles. He has as many followers at his beck and call as storm Robertland, held as it is.”

“That may be, but at what sacrifice?”

“I know not. But it is not I who demand the sacrifice—the cause of my family honour demands it—righteousness demands it—justice upon Gabriel Montgomerie demands it, and I should be false to myself were I to fail in my duty.”

“Ah, Sir Neill, your heart dictates to your judgment. Your love for Anna overrules your judgment.”

“Reason! Judgment! They will not bear the test of practice—at least not in this case.”

"Then, are your theories unsound? No, Sir Neill, it is the theory that is sound, and you would find the practice sound too had you but the patience to act on the theory."

"That may be, Captain Stewart, but what would you have done five years ago had anybody treated you and yours as Gabriel Montgomerie has treated me and mine?"

"Done, Sir," thundered Captain Stewart, his demeanour changed on the instant. "Why, Sir, I should have hung him as high as Haman. But," he added, after a momentary pause, during which he seemed to cool away as rapidly as he had risen, "but I have had experience. Experience teaches, and it has taught me."

"Captain Stewart, sometimes the heart is a better guide than the reason. Yours was this moment. Your intuition pointed the pathway, and though I cannot—nor would I if I could—hang Gabriel—I can and will retake my daughter out of his power; and that by some means or other—as yet I know not what. For, sooth to say," added Sir Neill, sadly, "I know not how Montgomeries could oppose Montgomeries, and I fear me I might not find them willing, and I should have to combat the Master of Eglinton's representative."

"I foresaw that difficulty—for a difficulty it is; and that may well dictate to you to pause ere you proceed further."

"Do not press me to stay my hand, Captain Stewart. Urge me no further. I am resolved, and I cannot go back. If I do wrong, the wrong be upon my own head. You have advised otherwise, and you are free from responsibility."

"I am," replied Captain Stewart, who by no means regretted the persistence of Sir Neill. "I am, and I say no more. Ways and means—that is the question—Eglinton or Glencairn?"

"Glencairn," returned Sir Neill Montgomerie. "I will not humble myself to go to the Master of Eglinton. He distrusted me once, and he shall never have the opportunity of distrusting me again. He is prejudiced against me, and I care not to stoop to remove the prejudice."

"But Glencairn is your feudal enemy?"

"True, but Gabriel Montgomerie is my enemy too; and while I have remained quiescent, he has been active; while I have dwelt in peace in Lainshaw, he has been the warder of Robertland."

"But can you enlist the services of the Cuninghames to fight against a Montgomerie—you who are a Montgomerie of the Montgomeries?"

"I can. My wife is a Cuninghame, and my daughter is one half a Cuninghame. Nor is this a struggle of family with family; it is but the effort of a father to preserve his daughter from a Montgomerie who has been false to the honour of the house of Eglinton, and who has robbed me of my daughter."

"Well, Glencairn be it. You will ride to Kilmaurs to meet with the Earl?"

"We will ride to Kilmaurs, for you must accompany me."

"I? How can I accompany you? The Earl of Glencairn knows who I am, and he will not forget his long expatriation from Court."

"The Earl of Glencairn is reputed a wise man, Captain Stewart, and he can afford to forgive the past. Why, he is one of the fathers of the Kirk itself; and a man who has signed the Solemn League and Covenant is not likely to harbour a grudge against you, who have been a Protestant throughout."

"I am not so sure of that, Sir Neill. There is policy in the Solemn League and Covenant as well as religion; and I should not care to go bail for the religion—at least for the piety—of some of the noble lords who have signed it, any more than I should care to vouch for their patriotism. But I may wrong Glencairn; men change with the times."

"You do wrong the Earl, unless reports belie his true character. Like the rest of us, he is growing older, and age brings wisdom."

"Should bring wisdom, you mean."

"And has done, I believe, in his case."

"I reserve my judgment until I know, Sir Neill. If not, if

the Earl remembers the past and bears any grudge on his mind, then my presence with you at Kilmaurs is likely to do more harm than good. Remember, I am not afraid to face the Earl ; I only hesitate in your interest."

"I do not doubt it, Captain Stewart ; but you will come with me. I am not afraid that Glencairn will punish me because of your past, and if he should—why then, I should only have myself to blame."

"I warn you, Sir Neill, because in my judgment I feel that I may be an obstacle in your path. I believe you would come better speed alone. But if you insist"—

"I do insist," replied Sir Neill, who became the more determined as Captain Stewart became the more scrupulous. "I should not care to go alone."

"Very well. The sooner the better. There is no time for delay."

"I shall see that the horses are harnessed instantly."

The same day Sir Neill Montgomerie and Captain Stewart halted by the gateway of Kilmaurs, and asked an interview of the Earl of Glencairn. Ushered into an apartment, untenanted ere they entered, they were asked to wait his coming. Neither of the two was comfortable. Sir Neill felt the anomaly that he, a Montgomerie, should have come to solicit assistance from a hereditary foe, and Captain Stewart, deep in his own reflections, looked uneasy—and looked as he felt.

They had not long to wait. The door opened, and in walked the Earl of Glencairn. Dignified and staid in his demeanour, as became a counsellor of the sovereign and a lord of the Covenant, he advanced to Sir Neill Montgomerie, and shook him as cordially by the hand as if there had been no century of feud between the families, and as if there were no bitter memories to be effaced. And Sir Neill, returning the grip, forgot that ever the smoke-wreaths had curled from the turrets of Eglinton, and felt that he had not humbled himself in venturing to seek aid from the lord of Kilmaurs.

But when, turning from Sir Neill, the Earl of Glencairn faced Captain Stewart, an instant change came over him. The cordiality vanished, the look of welcome died away. He flushed an instant, then drew himself up haughtily to his full height, and folded his arms.

Captain Stewart had felt uneasy ere the Earl of Glencairn had entered the apartment, but now that he was face to face with him, he was as calm, as dignified, as reserved in look and in gesture as the Earl himself. He looked steadily into the Earl's face ; and there was in his look the steadiness and the majesty of one who had not known to stoop to lower powers than those that sat upon the throne.

A moment the two looked at one another. Captain Stewart did not forget that he was in the castle of Kilmaurs, and he saluted its proud lord, bowing formally, yet with no assumption of either pride or arrogance. The Earl stiffly responded.

Sir Neill felt that it had been better for him that he had left Captain Stewart at Lainshaw. But there was no help for it now. He could not undo what he had done, and he must go through with it.

"It would be affectation on my part, sir," said the Earl, addressing Captain Stewart, and opening the conversation, "were I to pretend that I am not astonished at your presence in Kilmaurs."

"I confess," replied Captain Stewart, "that my presence here astonishes myself, though I had hoped that the memories of the past had died out with the past itself."

"The past, I am afraid," returned the Earl, "sometimes obtrudes on the present ; and though I should be ashamed to recall anything that might be painful to you, in my own house, I feel justified in saying that your past is a living memory that I can hardly be expected to forget."

"I regret that your lordship should so remember what is gone, partly because I desire to forget the past so far as concerns any wrong or injustice that I may ever have done you, but mainly

because I feel that my presence here may not tend to further the suit of my friend, Sir Neill Montgomerie."

"I am not so unjust, Sir, I hope, as to let any past dealings between you and me influence me in anything I may be able to do on behalf of one who has proved himself friendly and well-disposed towards myself. But you cannot but be aware that in pursuing any cause that has your active assistance, I am likely to be judged by the King, not so much on the merits of the cause itself as in the light of your association with it."

"The cause is none of mine, else I had not been here. I have no cause to promote, and I am here only as an Ayrshire gentleman, and as a friend of Sir Neill Montgomerie."

"A dangerous friend, surely! Pardon me saying so, but you cannot fail to know that I speak the truth."

"If there be justice, if there be a due sense of right and wrong in His Majesty, the cause of my friend will stand on its own merits, not on my demerits. And did I not regard it as a good cause, I would not be here to urge its claims upon you."

"I believe that; but sovereigns are like lesser mortals, and gauge their concerns from personal standpoints often, more than they do on abstract principles of right and wrong. Pray, be seated, gentlemen, and let me hear, in any case, what Sir Neill has to say. The matter, if I mistake not, has to do with Gabriel Montgomerie?"

"Your lordship has rightly guessed," replied Sir Neill, hastening to take up the conversation.

"In that case, you will not think it amiss if I call to our counsels one who is directly interested in them?"

"If you refer to William Cuninghame, Lord Glencairn," returned Sir Neill, "I should not object to his presence."

"It is to him I do refer," said the Earl. And he forthwith summoned William Cuninghame to the conclave.

Captain Stewart's presence had awakened a feeling of suspicion in the mind of the Earl, and in summoning William Cuninghame he was desirous less of his assistance than of his mere presence

as an auditor, who might, should occasion require it, tell the powers that were that the Earl had no dealings with Captain Stewart. Captain Stewart understood the workings of Lord Glencairn's mind, but he said nothing.

"Sir Neill Montgomerie," said the Earl, addressing William Cuninghame, "has done me the honour of paying me a visit on business that may interest you. It affects you, I understand, though I do not yet know what it is; and it is right, therefore, that you should be present to hear what passes."

Cuninghame seated himself at the table, and the Earl motioned to Sir Neill to proceed.

"The story is soon told," said Sir Neill Montgomerie. "Your lordship is aware that Robertland is in the hands of the Montgomeries, and that it is held for them by Gabriel Montgomerie of Hazlehead. Gabriel is a bold enough soldier, and a ready man; but I am sorry to say that he is also a man more willing to strike than to forgive, and quicker to do a foolish action than a wise one."

"Not an uncommon characteristic," remarked the Earl, drily.

"Your lordship will remember," resumed Sir Neill, "that I warned you that Gabriel was meditating revenge upon you personally. I thought it right to betray whatever of confidence there was in his communication to me, and make your lordship aware of his intention."

"I have not forgotten it. I will not forget it."

"Apart from that he has nourished a strong vindictive feeling towards me that has found vent in various ways. I have taken no notice of what he has either said or done until now; but now that he has carried off my daughter Anna to the house of Robertland, and there shut her up as a captive, I feel that I can no longer remain quiet. I must have her freed, and that at once; and I have come to you, Lord Glencairn, for your assistance."

"Carried off your daughter! The infernal scoundrel! But what would you have me do? Why have you appealed to me

and not to the Master of Eglinton, whose servant this Gabriel Montgomerie is ? ”

“Your lordship forgets that it was my wife, who was a Cunningham—”

“I had for the moment forgotten that. That was a most unfortunate business for the whole of us.”

“And besides, since Lord Eglinton’s death, the Master of Eglinton has openly distrusted me.”

“I’m afraid I can hardly feel surprised at it, Sir Neill. But I don’t mean to discuss the Master of Eglinton’s motives, or try to analyse the workings of his mind. What is it you would have me do ? ”

“I have told your lordship in what position I am. I have laid my needs and my wishes before you. I ask your assistance, but I should prefer to leave it to you to say after what fashion you can best and most speedily extend your aid.”

“Yes, but have you thought of nothing ? ”

“I have.”

“Of what ? ”

“I can see only the one way out of this, and that is to deal by Gabriel after his own fashion—to attack Robertland, in short, and force him to yield up my daughter.”

“A very serious proposal, indeed,” said the Earl, his eye lighting upon Captain Stewart, and a look of disquiet crossing his face. “A very serious proposal, and one that cannot be adopted without due forethought. If you ask me to use my influence on your behalf with the King, that I shall do gladly ; but you cannot fail to know that any overt act would to a certainty excite his Majesty’s ire.”

“But my child, Lord Glencairn ! What am I to do to recover my child.”

“Even if I were to accede to your wish, it would take time to attack Robertland, and all the while the attack was going on your daughter would be at the mercy of her captor. You do not fear any outrage on her person ? ”

"No, I must say honestly that I do not think Gabriel Montgomerie, bad as he is, capable of such a thing."

"Then why such terrible haste? Your daughter will be none the worse of a few days' confinement in Robertland; and you may depend upon it that the King will see to it that she is liberated. The Master of Eglinton cannot afford at this juncture to set the authority or the commands of his sovereign at naught."

"Then, my lord, you can only aid me with your influence? You cannot give me three score of horsemen that I may take the law into my own hand?"

The Earl of Glencairn shook his head. "I am afraid I cannot. Believe me," he said, "that I sympathise with you from the bottom of my heart, but I must not forget what is due to myself or what might be the consequence of my proceeding to so overt an act."

"Then," said Sir Neill, rising to his feet and speaking coldly, yet sadly, "then my visit has been in vain."

"No, not in vain," returned the Earl. "Believe me, I shall see that the right is done to you, and if you can but cultivate patience for a few days you will realise that my way is the shorter, after all."

The leave-taking was brief. The Earl was studiously courteous to Sir Neill Montgomerie, and as studiously formal and cold to Captain Stewart. When they had gone, he turned to William Cuninghame.

"This thing might have been done," he said, "and done too as Sir Neill desired, but for that Captain Stewart. I dare not undertake a cause that has his countenance. Were the king to hear that I had had recourse to arms at his instigation, or at the instigation of Sir Neill Montgomerie in his presence—God only knows what the consequences might be."

"I was not aware, my lord, that Captain Stewart had incurred his Majesty's displeasure," responded William Cuninghame.

"Then you do not know him?"

"No."

"Well, perhaps you had better not. At any rate, I have no time now to tell you his history."

"Would your lordship not sanction my undertaking Anna's relief?"

"Anna? who is Anna?"

"Sir Neill's daughter." And William Cuninghame flushed as the Earl scrutinised him, wondering at the familiar tones in which he spoke of the daughter of Lainshaw.

"I understand," observed the Earl, smiling, "But no, the risk is too great."

"I think not, my lord. I am sure that with two score men"—

"I did not refer to that risk," curtly returned the Earl. "Robertland could easily be taken, but Captain Stewart is a better buttress to it just now than all the thick walls of the keep."

William Cuninghame did not further urge his desire upon the Earl. He knew the Lord of Kilmaurs too well for that.

Riding homewards, "I told you, Sir Neill," said Captain Stewart. "I told you what it would be. I have cursed you with my presence."

"No, my friend," replied Sir Neill, "it is not you who have cursed me. Fate it is against me, not you."

"But if I had remained behind?"

"It would have been all the same. Heaven frowns upon me."

CHAPTER XXVI.

PLOTING ESCAPE—THE CAPTIVE REFUSES TO SOLICIT FREEDOM.

THAT same night William Cuninghame left the shelter of Kilmaurs, and the following day he rode along the banks of the Clyde towards the Castle of Newark. The Clyde was a fair stream. From its far-away source amid the uplands of Dumfries, in the regions "where the peesweep, the plover, and

whaup cry dreary ;" winding by many a glade, racing and gathering way as it came ; calling in its tributary streams to swell its volume and accentuate the living voice of its waters ; broadening out into placid stretches, reflecting in their bright depths the foliage of the quivering trees along its banks ; contracting within narrower limits, and swirling on with many a race and eddy ; sleeping a moment on level course, its surface hardly broken, hardly ruffled by the unseen impulse to hie away seawards ; roaring with thunderous tone, and crested foam, and fast-passing whirlpool, and dash against the rocks, and devastation in its swirl, over the falls that have never ceased their rough music, or withdrawn the panorama of their glories since time began ; still growing and flowing by village and hamlet, by town and church-tower, and by the stately fane of Saint Mungo ; pellucid to the eyes of the burghers of Glasgow as it swept by gorse and broomy-braes and stretching meadows ; watering the haughs and the holms, and laving the rocks, and meandering over the shallows ; its depths the haunt of the speckled trout, its pools the lair of the salmon—from its far-away source to its junction with the sea the river Clyde flowed untainted and unpolluted, ignorant of its future, thoughtless that one day the fleets of the nations should ride upon its surface, careless that in the days that were to come black war ships should cleave its depths, and blissfully unconscious that its crystal current should one day be befouled and besmirched by the congregating thousands upon its banks.

The Clyde, I say, was a fair stream. It swept by the Castle of Newark, and Newark looked across its surface to the rocks and the battlements of the high keep of Dumbarton. Along the river's banks William Cuninghame rode, nor stayed his course until he reached his destination.

Patrick Maxwell, the laird of Newark, did not share in the anxiety of William Cuninghame to have instant vengeance meted out upon the offending Montgomerie who held the house of Robertland, and who had put the cope-stone upon his offences—

the cope-stone so far as Cuninghame was concerned—by theftuously away-taking the daughter of Lainshaw. She was a Montgomerie, not a Cuninghame—why should he bestir himself to rescue a daughter of the house of Eglinton from the grip of a son of the same house ?

“It matters not a straw to me,” he said, “what becomes of the girl. She is none of my kith or kin. If she were a Cuninghame I could understand the pressing need for haste to have justice done upon this Gabriel Montgomerie ; but she is a Montgomerie, and if Montgomerie steal Montgomerie why should either Cuninghame or Maxwell interfere ?”

This view of the matter had not occurred to William Cuninghame, and it nonplussed him.

“No,” he replied, “what you say is quite true, but her mother was a Cuninghame.”

“Yes, and had the indefensible taste to ally herself with a Montgomerie. But for her mother, there would have been none of this striving ; and I cannot see that we owe either her or her offspring anything.”

“Lady Elizabeth has been expatriated because she was a Cuninghame,” returned William, “and the Montgomeries hold aloof from her husband, Sir Neill of Lainshaw.”

“Do they ?” retorted Maxwell, “I think I’ve heard it said somewhere that a house divided against itself cannot stand. If Montgomerie, then, rise against Montgomerie, the Cuninghames will have less difficulty in coming to their own again.”

“True, and now is the time to drive in the wedge. When Sir Neill is friendly, the greater is our opportunity.”

“I’m not so sure about that. But hearken, my friend,” said Maxwell, “I promised you as many men as would enable you to win back the house of Robertland, and I don’t mean to flinch from my word ; but it will take a week, at least, to get them ready for the journey.”

“A week !” ejaculated William Cuninghame, “a week, sir !

Why, who knows what may happen to Anna Montgomerie in a week?"

"Who cares what may happen?" replied Maxwell. "Her weal or woe nowise concern me. I daresay she is safe enough—'gad, I shouldn't be a whit surprised if she had connived at the whole thing."

"No, no, that is impossible. Anna is a Montgomerie in name, but she is a Cuninghame in heart and in sympathy."

"Then why doesn't she become one in name too?" bluntly demanded Maxwell.

"Perhaps she may one day," replied William Cuninghame, reddening to the roots of his hair as he confessed his secret.

"Ah, I see, I see," responded Maxwell, "that's it, is it? That sheds a new light on the matter. But as I say, it will take time."

"It will take less time now than ever it will again," replied Cuninghame, "because you shall have the assistance of Sir Neill Montgomerie of Lainshaw. He will provide your men with a resting-place and with food. He has an ample stand of arms, if arms are required, more than you can instantly supply. His stable will be at your service, and he himself will join with right good-will. And if there should be any inquiry into the matter, the influence and the power of the Montgomeries will be weakened when we have him on our side."

"There's something in what you say. I'll think about it for an hour or two. Meanwhile you can rest yourself from the fatigue of your journey."

William Cuninghame could make no more of it. He retired and left Maxwell alone with his thoughts. What came of these may be deferred in the telling until we return to Robertland, and once more look in upon the captive daughter of Lainshaw in her enforced solitude.

Though Anna was to all appearance fairly reconciled to her fate and content to abide the natural evolution of events, she was none the less zealous of escape. But how? Robertland was a

stronghold. Its walls had stood for centuries and seemed good for centuries more. Her apartments were high above ground—so high that, unless by the wings of the dove, escape in that direction was out of the question. There was, so far as she knew, only one exit, and that by way of the main stairs; and, if she were to succeed in navigating these, below were the oaken doors, and the closed gates, and the warders on duty, and the men at arms, and Gabriel Montgomerie and his followers, never unmindful of the captive and of the necessity for holding her safe.

If she were to escape, the escape must be effected by the aid of old Bessie, the solitary remnant of Cuninghams left to Robertland. And she was hostile. In addition to being hostile, she was very old; and Anna did not need to be told that old women of Bessie's type were strong in their antipathies. Bessie hated the Montgomeries, and to the grave she would go with her hatred. What hope, then, was there that her antipathies to the race of Eglinton in general should be changed to sympathy for a daughter of the house?

But desperate situations evolve desperate efforts; and upon Bessie Anna Montgomerie exercised her skill in order to persuade her to open for her the portals to freedom.

"It is too bad in you, Bessie," she said to the old woman, "to keep me shut up here when you might open the gates and let me go home. Surely you never had a daughter of your own?"

"Na, na, Miss, nae dochter ever gladdened my een. Maybe if God had gi'en me a dochter I wad hae thocht different towards ye; but my three bairns were a' sons."

"You never told me that before, Bessie?"

"An' why sud I? Why sud I tell ye anything about them? Ilk ane o' them—aye, an' their faither as weel—fell a victim tae the Montgomeries. They were a' brought hame tae me frae the field lyin' across the backs o' their horses."

"I never heard of that before, Bessie."

"That's verra likely; an' ye may never hear o't again. But

it's true for a' that. I hae served in this hoose since I was a lassie. My man was ane o' the servants tae Robertland, an' here ha'e I bided a' my life inside the gates o' the big hoose. We were but puir folk ; but, husbands and boys, they were a' strong o' heart an' o' airm, an' ready tae gang whaur they were sent at the biddin' o' Robertland. They gi'ed their lives for the cause, jist as I should hae dune if mine had been needed, an' they dee'd as becam' them. But that disna prevent me thinkin' o' them, an' it disna prevent me thinkin' o' the Montgomeries an' cursin' them when I think o' them."

"But surely, Bessie, that is sinful. You know the families were at feud, the Cuninghames and the Montgomeries, one with another, and there must have been as many men killed on the one side as on the other."

"That may be ; but what ha'e I tae dae wi' that ? Will the death o' the Montgomeries bring back tae me my husband an' my three braw sons ? Nae tear ha'e I shed for their memory sin' the day the last o' the three was brocht here a' gashed an' wi' his een set in the sleep o' death, but frae then till noo I ha'e cursed the Montgomeries. Ye say it is sinful ? May be ; but I curse them for a' that, body an' soul, in goin' oot an' comin' in, in goods an' gear, in house an' fauld, in hall an' cot, in basket an' store. May the God o' judgment blast them, root an' branch !"

"Oh Bessie, Bessie, do not use such terrible language. The Montgomeries may have sinned—they have sinned—against you, but as you hope for mercy yourself, so must you extend mercy to others."

"Mercy ! Mercy ! There was nae mercy shewn tae me an' tae mine—why then sud I pray for mercy for ithers ? Na na, Miss, let them grant mercy wha can."

"But I have never wronged you, Bessie. . I have never done you any harm—why should you include me in your cursing ?"

"I curse at large the hale race o' the Montgomeries. I dinna curse in detail. There micht be a guid ane here an' there, an' if

there sud be the curse'll gie them the go-bye. It'll only licht on the evil anes."

"Then there is some hope for me, I think, Bessie. You know to begin with, I am only half a Montgomerie. My mother was a Cuninghame, and I am so much of a Cuninghame myself, that Gabriel Montgomerie has carried me away a prisoner and shut me up here."

"He did'na shut ye up here, I'm thinkin', because ye were a Cuninghame, but because ye're a lassie, an' because ye hae a bonnie face—for a Montgomerie."

"But I'm not like the Montgomeries at all, Bessie. They say I am my mother's living image; and she was a daughter of the laird of Aiket—and she was a Cuninghame to the back bone."

"Aye, that's true, an' yer mither was a richt bauld woman. It was a noble deed she did."

Bessie rubbed her hands together in admiration, and her eyes flashed out the gratification begotten of the recollection.

"What do you refer to?" asked Anna, at a loss to understand the old woman's gratification.

"What dae I refer tae?" replied Bessie, "What sud I refer tae? What could I refer tae, but the ae' thing? An' I say again it was a noble deed tae compass the death of the Earl o' Eglinton as she did. It was a gran' atonement for the sin she committed when she forgot hersel' sae far as tae marry a Montgomerie."

"Hush, Bessie, for any sake don't speak like that. The Earl's death has been a curse to us all—to Robertland, to Clonbeith, to Corsehill, to my father, to me, and to my mother."

"Na, na, no tae yer mither. Her name'll gang doon tae posterity wi' the name o' Deborah, an' wi' the name o' Jael the wife o' Heber the Kenite. Heaven smiled on Jael when she ca'ed the nail intae the heid o' Sisera the captain o' the Canaanitish host, and I mak' nae doot that heaven smiled as sweetly on the Lady Elizabeth when she compassed the death o' the Earl as ever it did on the wife o' Heber the Kenite."

"Hush, hush, Bessie, don't speak like that. Heaven smiles not on deeds of bloodshed."

"When did it stop smiling on them, then, I would like tae ken? A' through the scriptures o' the Old Testament it smiled on bloodshed; an' God's ain chosen race waded in blood richt tae their inheritance."

"So they did, Bessie; but we live now under the gospel of peace. I'm afraid it's no use trying to persuade you that the killing of the Earl of Eglinton was a sin. It has brought its own punishment with it, anyway, and one bit of that punishment is that I am here a prisoner. What do you owe to Gabriel Montgomerie that you should be so resolved to keep me here a captive?"

"What dae I owe you that I sud care whether ye're a prisoner or no?"

"I am a woman, Bessie."

"Aye, a Montgomerie woman, a dochter o' Lainshaw."

"A daughter of Lady Elizabeth, of the house of Aitket."

"There's something in that, Miss, but ye bear yer faither's name."

"Yes, but my mother's blood runs in my veins."

"So does yer faither's."

"Then I am a prisoner to a Montgomerie—a Montgomerie, too, who holds the house of Robertland, and who has been partly instrumental in driving the laird of Robertland across the seas. What do you owe him, I ask you again?"

"Owe him! I owe him naething. If I had but the wit o' the Lady Elizabeth—o' yer mither, Miss—Gabriel Montgomerie wadna be lang ere he slept wi' his faithers."

"Perhaps not, Bessie, but leave Gabriel Montgomerie alone. He has not far to look for his recompense."

"Maybe no, but I canna see't ony the nearer."

"Bessie, you can keep a secret if I give you one?"

"Aye."

"Well, listen a moment. Do you know who came to Lainshaw in the autumn of last year?"

"Wha?"

"William Cuninghame, the young laird of Robertland."

Bessie's eyes sparkled with new found interest, and she bent forward lest she should miss a word of what was to come.

"Yes, Bessie, none other than William Cuninghame. You remember him?"

"Remember him? Aye, weel. I nursed him when he was but a bit helpless bairn. Puir chiel, I'm thinkin' he maun hae wandered late and early ere he socht the shelter o' Lainshaw."

"Why should he? My father is his uncle. No, he came straight to Lainshaw and walked boldly in, and all the summer months he remained with us. My father sheltered him."

"Yer faither honoured himsel', Miss. But what kin' o' a Montgomerie maun yer faither be when he gied shelter an' meat tae a Cuninghame? My! I'm beginnin' tae think he maun be a degenerate Montgomerie after a'."

Bessie's ideas of feudal sympathies and hates, and her knowledge of character beyond these, were alike contracted by circumstances. She could not understand why any Ayrshire gentleman should step beyond the bounds of his family predestination; and where Anna expected to find sympathy because of her father's kindness to a scion of the house of Glencairn, she had only awakened in Bessie's mind a suspicion of Sir Neil Montgomerie's degeneracy.

"I dinna mean," resumed Bessie, when she saw the look of vexation come upon Anna's face, "I dinna mean tae say that Sir Neill's no a' that a faither sud be; but it's bye-ordinar' strange that he sud hae a Cuninghame in his power, an' let him gang scot-free—no tae mention keepin' him in his ain hoose and feedin' him for months."

"Perhaps it is strange, Bessie, but it's true nevertheless; and surely you'll not forget that if I ask a favour of you?"

"No, maybe no."

"You must let me away out of this, then. What have I done to you that you should so closely watch me?"

"I've watched ye because ye're a Montgomerie, an' because I was bidden watch ye."

"Bidden by a Montgomerie, Bessie."

"It matters nocht. Ae Montgomerie an' anither are alike tae me; an' if I hae naething tae gain by pleasin' ane or displeasin' anither, why sud I bother mysel' tae dae ocht else than obey orders?"

"Bessie, what if William Cuninghame were coming with a force of Cuninghames or of Maxwells to relieve me and carry me out of the clutches of Gabriel Montgomerie?"

"It would be a winner, Miss."

"But if it were true, what would you do then?"

"If I thocht it was true I might let ye slip. But I can hardly believe't."

"Why, there's nothing extraordinary about it. My father went to Aiket for a wife—why should William Cuninghame not go to Lainshaw?"

Bessie took some time to realise the import of Anna Montgomerie's question, but when at last its meaning dawned upon her and then broke in sunshine upon her understanding, her face brightened, broadening smiles dispersed the wrinkles, she chuckled, rubbed her hands and crooned to herself with a satisfaction she did not try to conceal.

"I'll think about it," she said, after a pause, "and see what can be dune. But we'll need tae walk warily and we'll need tae walk charily. I'm as closely watched as ye are yer'sel'; but I have'na forgotten a' that I've learned."

"Whatever you do, Bessie, be careful not to get yourself into trouble."

"Never fash yer heid aboot me, I tell ye, Miss. I could pit them a', ilka mother's son o' them, asleep, sae that they'd ne'er wauken again till they stood rubbin' their een at the judgment bar o' the Almichty."

"Hush, hush, Bessie, I'd rather stay where I am a score of months than that you should take one single life for the price of my liberty."

"They're only Montgomeries, Miss, an' there wad be naething amiss in my gi'en' them a potion that wad pit an end tae their fechtin' an' their iniquities. Their cup o' wickedness is fu' already."

"But you must not, Bessie. You must not do any such thing. It would be a horrible wickedness."

"A horrible wickedness, wad it?" Bessie laughed.

"Yes, and if you suggest such a thing I'll choose to stay where I am, rather than avail myself of your services. I don't want a hair of their heads injured. All I want is to go hence, but not a life must be sacrificed for me."

"Verra weel, Miss, but it seems to me that ye steek yer een against a providential openin'. We maun try some other way, I'm thinkin', if ye'll no tak' the gate that I wad blithely open for ye, but I'll think aboot it an' see what I can dae."

The task before Bessie was not an easy one. Gabriel Montgomerie was fully conscious that he held Robertland on sufferance, and that any dereliction of duty might involve the loss of the house. His guards relieved one another night and day. A watch was kept on the head of the only staircase by which Anna could reach the lower floors of the building; and even if she were to succeed in escaping his vigilance—a hardly possible contingency—she had still to run the gauntlet of watchmen in the hall, and without; of locked gates, with the keys in the keeping of the warden himself; of the back entrance carefully closed and guarded; of windows nailed down and impossible of exit. From without there was no passing in; from within there was no going out, without permission of Gabriel Montgomerie. And the apartments to which Anna was confined were high above the ground. Bessie's problem, therefore, was not by any means easy of solution. But she set herself to think it out to the best of her ability.

Anna received only one more visit from Gabriel Montgomerie. Each day, as it passed, Gabriel grew the more uneasy, the more dissatisfied; the more head-strong, nevertheless, in pursuing the course upon which he had entered. Retreat he could not. That would be an acknowledgment that he had done wrong, and Gabriel, while he knew in his heart that he had done wrong, was less than ever the man to admit it. He would go on persevering in his wrong-doing rather than that it should be said that Gabriel Montgomerie had been weak enough to retrace his footsteps.

He did not know why he was impelled once again to visit his captive. He thought of doing it, and set the thought aside. He thought a second time, and then he sought justification for it. He thought a third time, made up his mind, and then, having resolved, acted on his resolve. To Anna's apartments, accordingly, he repaired, not knowing the why or the wherefore.

"I am afraid," he said, as he entered, "that my presence is not so welcome as I could wish that it were."

"It is just as welcome," replied Anna, "as you have any right to expect that it should be."

"That may be; but I did not expect to find you smiling at my approach; though still I could wish that that too were otherwise."

"I am not very well able to decline intercourse with you, Gabriel," said Anna, "unless I revert again to silence, and that I would rather not do, but you will better consult my wishes by stating what you have come to say than by discussing matters that cannot concern us."

"Why, Anna, you talk as if we had nothing in common, not even feelings or associations!"

"What feelings, what associations have we in common? What have I done that you should have brought me hither and shut me up as a captive? And how can you expect me to remember what we once had in common, when in the present you inflict,

and continue to inflict a grievous wrong on me? What justification have you to offer for it? What do you hope to gain by it?"

"I have justification enough to myself, and I am not required to justify myself to you; and what I hope to gain by it—that, too, is a matter for myself, and myself alone."

"I thought as much. You have no justification. You can have none. At the very best you are striking the father through the daughter. A manly course, forsooth, Gabriel Montgomerie!"

"Forbear your taunts, Anna. They can only tend to your own detriment. Are you not willing to purchase your freedom by civility, if by nothing else?"

"I am not willing to purchase my freedom at all. Rather would I remain where I am, than sue you, ever so humbly, for release. You have done a foolish thing, Gabriel, in bringing me here; and you perpetuate your folly because you have neither the strength nor the manliness to undo it. Open the door and bid me go, and I will go without one condition or another; but not otherwise."

"You are determined to rivet the chains the tighter. You need not hope to go hence till my object is achieved, and until I have tamed the pride of your father and punished him for his alliance with the house of Glencairn. That is one of my objects—you know the other."

"I did know the other. Can it be possible that you think so little of me, that you could imagine I would purchase temporary freedom at the price of a life-long captivity to you? I thought better of you, Gabriel."

"Then you thought me more than human. When my mind is made up, I am not going to be thwarted, so long as the power to do is in my hands; and, though I have given up any hopes of ever gaining you for my wife, I can at least have the satisfaction of knowing that, while you are here, you can be the wife of none other."

"Noble notions, indeed! But why should we speak of these things? You came here—for what purpose? Tell me what

you want to say, and then—then I shall be glad to be left alone again.”

“I came simply to speak with you, Anna, and to see if you were still minded as before.”

“You came to gloat over me—your captive—your spoil—a woman who has fallen tribute to your valour! If that was your purpose, you have achieved it, and you may depart satisfied.”

“Anna, Anna, why do you taunt me? Why do you not give me an opportunity to do the right by you?”

“Do the right, then. Open the door and bid me go. That is the only right you can do me, and none other do I ask.”

“And that is what I am not going to do. When I brought you here, I did not act on the spur of the moment, or on a headstrong passing impulse. I calculated it all beforehand, Anna, and here you must remain till it suits my purpose to bid you go. And why—why, if you are so precious to your father—does he not come and take you?”

“Rest assured he will come for me. Robertland gates will be opened from without, if you do not open them from within, and I shall go hence without your permission.”

“I desire nothing better than to defend my ward. But the Cuninghames are degenerate. We have driven them to the wall; and it is to the Cuninghames alone that your father can look. He has forfeited the friendship of his own kith and kin, and he must consort with the stranger and the enemy if he is to have an ally at all.”

“My father, Gabriel Montgomerie, will not sue you for the freedom of his child—depend upon that. He will not bend the knee to you to obtain my liberation; and I would rather remain where I am till the close of the chapter, than I would have him solicit favour at your hands. I came here into bondage at your will—I shall go hence, redeemed without money and without price, save such price as you shall have to pay for the outrage you have done upon a daughter of Lainshaw.”

“Our hopes are one at least then, Anna; for nothing would

more gratify me than to see your father in arms at the Castle gate, and with him that menial Cuninghame, who waited upon your father's table."

"Gabriel, the day is yours, and with it the taunt and the jeer ; but the morrow is for him who may claim it. I should scorn to
• reply as my feelings dictate, or reduce myself to the level to which you have descended. Let us both bide our time. The future will declare for us."

"I am willing that it should—the future, and with it the sword and the hagbut and the saddle, and you the guerdon of the battle."

"No, not I the guerdon, Gabriel. I live for others and not for you. But pray cease, we have talked long enough."

Anna emphasized her hint by bowing with stately formality to her captor ; and he, collecting what dignity remained with him, returned the salutation and retired.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ROBERTLAND CHANGES MASTERS.

THE tramp of the watchman was heard without ; the watchman within kept vigil ; otherwise Robertland was at rest. From Anna Cuninghame, high up in her chamber, to old Bessie, on the basement, the stillness of sleep was all but all-pervading.

All but—not altogether. For Bessie was very much the reverse of asleep. She had lain down, but not to sleep. The drowsy god claimed Gabriel Montgomerie and the men-at-arms, and he lightly enfolded Anna Montgomerie even, but not for one second that night did he touch the eyelids of the old woman. Bessie had lived so long that she could afford to do without a night's slumber. In the natural ordering of events,

she had not long to wait ere she should enjoy that dreamless slumber that comes in the end to us all.

Ere the sun had shot his early beams against the clouds that overhung his eastern coming, and darted into them the first portents of the day, Bessie rose from bed. It was nothing new for the watchmen to find her awake when others were asleep. She wandered over the house at all hours, and came so suddenly upon them betimes that she made them feel eerie. She moved noiselessly, though she moved slowly ; and the strong men with all their courage, were prone to aver that she was uncanny as she thus glided along passages and went softly upstairs, and haunted the scenes where her early years had been spent, and where her memories clustered thick as the fallen leaves of the autumn in the woodlands adjacent.

A faint light shone in the upper passage where the watchman kept vigil. It was a sleepy vigil. The hour before the dawn is the most trying hour of all, and the retainer of Eglinton who walked backwards and forwards while his fellows slumbered had a hard fight to beat off the besetting drowsiness. He was thus busy combatting sleep when Bessie appeared. She came along in her own apparently aimless fashion, as if she were emulating some vagrant spirit of Robertland, to whom the eternal rest had been denied, and who had been doomed to spend its days amid surroundings akin to its once mortal sympathies.

"Ye're early afoot, Bessie," said the watchman, glad to have an opportunity to talk, even with the old woman, and so pass a minute in a more congenial occupation than resisting the inclination to go to sleep.

"Aye," replied Bessie, "I canna sleep the nicht, an' I canna thole tae lie abed when I canna sleep."

"Gad, I could sleep, Bessie, gin I had the chance."

"Maybe ye could, but you're no me. Gin ye war as auld as me, ye micht'na be able tae sleep whenever ye wantit tae."

"I wadna say, Bessie ! nor wud I say that I'm likely ever tae

be sae auld as ye are. They tell me y've seen a hunner years gang bye."

"I've seen a wheen winters, I can tell ye; but if ye're sae sleepy as ye say ye are—an' ye look gey an' sleepy I can tell ye—can ye no get something tae keep ye wauken?"

"It's easy to speak, woman—what can I get up here tae keep me frae dozin', except exercise—walkin' back an' forrit, an' thinkin', an' thinkin'."

"Maybe I could bring ye a cup o' hame-brewed ale. Ye're civil, an' that's mair than some o' ye are when ye see me walkin' here awa' at nicht, an' if ye like tae tak' it, I'll fetch't in a minute or twa. It's maskin' noo for mysel' at the fireside."

"I wish ye'd bring me something—I dinna care muckle what, sae lang as it'll keep me wauken."

"Bide a wee then whaur ye are," replied Bessie, returning by the way by which she had come.

Descending to the kitchen, where she slept, Bessie took from the cask a flagon of ale, poured out a hornful of its invigorating contents, and then set the horn down upon the table. Bessie was tremulous with age, and her hand shook as she poured out the ale; but there was not the tremor of a muscle as she held up to the light—a faint miserable candle-light, but still a light—a small vial containing some powerful narcotic, which she took from a chest that contained her worldly goods and gear, and added a small quantity of its contents to the generous liquor. That done, she carried the cup to the sentinel. He took it from her and drank it off.

Bessie received the cup from the watchman's hand.

"Thank ye, Bessie," he said, "that mak's me a better man."

"Aye will't," replied Bessie, "yer watch'll no trouble ye muckle noo."

Downstairs again went the old woman; and as she went she muttered to herself.

"Na," she said, speaking softly, "na, yer watch'll no trouble ye lang. It'll dae ye nae harm, my man, unless that Gabriel

Montgomerie comes along and clures yer heid. Ye maun tak' yer chance o' that, I'm thinkin'. Mony a better man than ever ye were has had his head laid open in Robertland ere noo, an' never a word aboot it ; and if Gabriel Montgomerie kills ye, ye'll snuff oot like the lave, an' be forgotten as they've been."

Awhile the sentry kept watch. The liquor fortified him, banished his drowsiness, and made the moments speed the quicker and the more cheerily. But ere long there began to come over him a sense of enervation and listlessness, not altogether unpleasant, but which, try as he might, he could not shake off. It was accompanied by soothing thoughts and half-conscious visions. Gentle voices seemed to sound along the dreary solitude of the passage, and scenes far brighter than those of Robertland unfolded themselves to his gaze. He sat down on the topmost step of the stair that he might enjoy them. The heavy walls disappeared and the darkness ; and in their place came the sunshine of the glorious woodland. The softly sighing wind became the gentlest of zephyrs, robbed of the chilliness of night, and fragrant with the heavy odours of the pine land. He had no wish to rise, no desire to exert himself. He was afraid to move lest the visions should vanish. And so he sat on until the zephyrs died away in a still, dead calm, until the voices were hushed into silence, until the woodland faded away from his gaze. He felt the sense of a universal hush.

And so far as he was concerned there was a universal hush, for he slept a slumber that should know no waking.

Bessie did not long remain in the kitchen. She knew the potency of the drug, and when she had given it time to fulfil its mission, she returned to the upper floor. The light fell on the face of the sleeping sentinel, all unconscious of his watch. The old woman hardly deigned to look at him, but, holding on her way, she went to the chamber where Anna Montgomerie lay sleeping.

Anna's slumber was not profound ; and light as was the foot-fall of Bessie in the room, she heard it and sat up.

"Is that you, Bessie?" she asked.

"Aye," croaked the old woman. "Get up."

"Get up! Why, Bessie?"

"Get up," repeated Bessie in firmer tones. As Bessie spoke she removed the shade from the candle she carried in her hand, and set the candle on the dressing table.

"Quick," continued the old woman, "it will be daylight in a wee, and I want ye oot o' this ere the sun has left his bed."

"But how, Bessie?"

"Speer nae questions, I'll see to the how."

"The sentinel, Bessie—can we pass him?"

"Aye," chuckled Bessie, "he's safe enough."

"Oh! Bessie, you don't mean to say that you have—"

"Poisoned him? No, I've put him to sleep."

"But he'll waken again?"

"He'll wauken at the judgment, if Gabriel Montgomerie comes across him—at the Judgment at the last day."

"Oh! Bessie, how could you do it?"

"Speer nae questions. Be quick, I say; for wi' the daylight the hoose'll be stirrin', an' we maun be awa' an' in God's daylight ere Gabriel Montgomerie finds the bird flown."

Without questioning further, without loss of time, Anna sprang from bed and proceeded to dress. All the while she was thus engaged the forces of night and morning were struggling together for the mastery; and daylight—God's daylight, as Bessie put it—though the night is His as well as the day—was beginning to pale the flame of the flickering candle. The passages were still enveloped in gloom, and the old woman carried the candle. Along the corridors they went as quietly, as noiselessly as they could, nor did they pause for a moment until they reached the head of the staircase where Anna knew the sentinel should have been found at his post.

Deep was his slumber. Bessie flashed the candle light in his face, but response there was none. Deep-sealed were his eyelids, his thoughts, his visions, his consciousness all at rest. Anna

shuddered as she looked at him, her womanly sympathy finding a moment to expand on the slumbering sentinel. For well she knew that were Gabriel to find him asleep at his post, little sympathy would he find from the stern warder of Robertland.

But they passed on. Lower and lower they descended. Anna felt herself with each descending footstep, one step nearer freedom. She was still in the jaws of danger, but the fresh morning air that blew in the corridors and on the stair-case was the same that rustled in the tree tops and sped away over field and fell; and she breathed freedom in it. It at least was free and unrestrained; and she would ere long be free and unrestrained as well. It passed without where the grass grew, and the birds twittered and sang; and Anna longed to press the grass with her feet, and to stand amid the foliage alive with the feathered singers.

But she was not yet free. The heavy walls were still about and around her, the oaken doors were shut and barred, and locked, the gates were closed, and without the sentinel kept watch as he looked out over the morning. How were they—how was she to exchange the interior of Robertland for the exterior? Anna knew not. All she knew was that she was following in the footsteps of Bessie; and she trusted Bessie that she would carry her through.

The basement floor was reached. Above towered the castle. All was silent. Not a sound awoke the stillness of the house, save those seldom absent occasional sounds that are never afar when absolute quiet is a felt necessity. They passed through the kitchen and entered the pantry. Beneath were the vaults. A ring-bolt in a heavy stone indicated the entrance.

Bessie stooped and caught hold of the ring. Exerting her strength she endeavoured to raise the stone. But in vain. The stone resisted her efforts. Anna joined her. Possessed of good muscular force she added her strength to that of the old woman. Slowly the stone yielded to the pressure.

Beneath—the blackness of darkness. A darkness that Anna

felt. It was heavy, it was chill, and from the depth came up an atmosphere damp and musty—an atmosphere that had been long imprisoned. Anna drew back.

“Must we go down into that horrid vault?” asked Anna, whispering.

“We must,” replied the old woman.

What! Exchange the growing light for the noisome darkness? There was no alternative. A faint suspicion possessed Anna that Bessie was about to consummate a great revenge on the Montgomeries. It passed away as speedily as it had entered. Bessie must be trusted.

They stood together and looked down. Their eyes were being familiarised with the gloom. Its terrors began to disappear. Freedom lay through that gloom. Freedom was on the other side of it. Why pause at the darkness when the light of day glimmered beyond it?

Enter they must. Anna looked down. She knelt on the floor and tried to pierce the darkness, and while she was thus engaged—

Hark! the noise of horsemen without, the shouts of men, the hailing of the sentry, the thunder of the gong in the hall, footsteps above and around, a rushing to and fro, the voice of Gabriel Montgomerie, Robertland alive with the hurried movements of the men at arms. What could have happened?

“Too late, too late,” groaned old Bessie, hastily shutting down the trap; “quick, quick, this way!”

Hurrying through the kitchen, Bessie, with wonderful speed, entered a small apartment adjoining. Hence, surely, there was no escape. It was a prison, if prison there was!

Not so. In the panelling Bessie touched a spring, pushed open a part of what had seemed a continuous wall, and entered, dragging Anna after her. Noiselessly she closed the door, and together, and surrounded by a gloom as intense and as solemn as that of the vault, the two women waited further developments.

Patrick Maxwell of Newark had not wasted time in thinking

what course he should pursue. Maxwell was a thorough-paced foe to the house of Montgomerie. It rankled still in his mind that his relative had been slain on the streets of Paisley. No sufficient atonement had yet been done. Sir Robert of Skelmorlie was dead ; so was his son ; but Maxwell's vengeance was still alive, and he was as ready as ever to strike a blow for his friends, the Cuninghames, and at his enemies who looked inwards upon Eglinton. Gabriel Montgomerie was one of the latter ; and when Maxwell set about thinking what he should do, his doubts, if he had any, speedily reached a solution.

And once resolved, Maxwell lost no time. He summoned his retainers from the immediate neighbourhood of Newark. Post haste he sent out his messengers ; and within a few hours, armed, mounted, and ready for the way, the men at arms came trooping in. Nor was the evening far advanced ere they were riding along the banks of Clyde. Long ere nightfall they had turned their backs upon the river, and were pricking their way across Renfrewshire to the confines of Ayrshire. By moonlight they travelled, and by starlight, across the sleeping country. Everywhere around them stretched the fields, the plains of peace ; but they left these behind them, placid under the moonbeams and the sheen and glint of the stars ; and skirting mansion and cot, and slumbering village and clachan, they rested not until they were within easy hail of Robertland. A while they dismounted and stretched their limbs upon the grass, giving the weary horses an hour or two's repose from travel.

William Cuninghame utilised the period of rest to ride across to Lainshaw, where in the dark hours of the early morning the sound of his horse's hoofs fell on the ears of Sir Neill Montgomerie ; and, when he returned to where Maxwell of Newark awaited his coming, Sir Neill was with him.

Maxwell was more than doubtful of Sir Neill. He was a Montgomerie. Could any good thing come out of Nazareth ? He was quite willing after a fashion to believe all for which William Cuninghame vouched ; but in his heart there was a

sense of distrust. He would not that Sir Neill should openly accompany him. If fighting there was to be, it must be done by the Maxwells and the Cuninghames. And the most to which he would consent was to place a small force under Sir Neill, not to go into active combat, but to effect a surprise should events transpire as Sir Neill himself ventured to think they would. Sir Neill's anxiety and his promptings to vengeance, Maxwell argued, were due to the stealing away of his daughter ; that of the Maxwells and the Cuninghames sprang from other sources. And if there was to be fighting, there must be vengeance ; and if vengeance upon the Montgomeries, a Montgomerie was not the man to be trusted to execute it. So, at least, reasoned Patrick Maxwell of Newark. Sir Neill had no alternative to obedience. The laird of Newark told him bluntly what he thought, and he was compelled to submit where insistence was out of the question.

Ere sunrise the Maxwells were once again in motion. The main body, thirty strong, under command of the stout laird of Newark himself, advanced straight upon Robertland, its inmates still wrapped in unconscious slumber ; the remainder, with whom rode Sir Neill Montgomerie, reached the neighbourhood of the house by a circuitous route, and from a secluded shelter watched the development of events ; and waited, ready for action.

It was a glorious morning that. The sun rose for a bright day, and bright was his rising. The birds felt his influence ere he left the horizon ; and no sooner had he cleared the tree tops than Nature smiled his reflected glory back to him. Alas that the strifes of man should obtrude themselves upon the sanctuary of Nature in its quiet and its beauty !

But so it is. The Maxwells, and William Cuninghame with them, rode straight to Robertland, and their shouts and cries and the firing of their hagbuts and their pistols broke in upon the stillness, and startled from their couches the ready-handed men who composed the garrison. The excitement without communicated itself to those within ; and from window and turret

and wall, from embrasure and gateway, the challenge was returned, and that without reserve.

Gabriel Montgomerie was not a whit disconcerted. The sounds of the fray were music to him. Impetuous, rash, hot-headed, and thoughtless; vindictive too and revengeful, his impulsive nature had not one atom or grain of cowardice in it. He heard the shouts, he knew what they meant, and he rose calm and confident and the possessor of the strange joy that the warrior feels. His commanding tones rang over the din, and quick to his summons came his men and formed themselves up beneath his eye, that he might see they were all there. They were all there save one.

"Where is Halliday?" asked Gabriel.

"He was on duty this morning upstairs," replied one of Halliday's comrades.

"Go and fetch him," returned Gabriel. "Or stay. I'll go myself."

A suspicion had entered Gabriel's mind that something was amiss. Carrying his sword beneath his arm, he darted from the hall, where the men were mustered, and hurried upstairs. The sleeping sentinel told his own tale. Gabriel kicked him roughly and ordered him to arise. But the sleeper slept on.

"If there's anything amiss you'll die for this," muttered Gabriel, as he hurried past the sentinel and made for the apartments which Anna had occupied. Hurried as were his movements, he yet paused a moment to knock at the door; but receiving no response, he entered. The rooms were untenanted. The bird had flown.

A glance was sufficient to convince Gabriel that Anna had not hidden herself in the apartments; and with a muttered curse he dashed downstairs. As he passed the sentinel, still reposing in his deep slumber, he raised his sword and struck him across the head. He did not stop to witness the result; he had no need to stop. Gabriel had struck many an angry blow in his time, and he did not require to be told what force to put into a stroke

that was not to demand a second to fulfil its intent. He knew the sentinel was dead. Better dead than slumbering when the tide of battle had rolled up to the gates. And better to die then and there than to hang suspended from the yett of Robertland when the sun was going down. Better to slip away, gliding from Dreamland out into the abyss, than to feel the disgrace of a disgraceful death.

The Maxwells were loud in their cries.

"I hear you," muttered Gabriel; "I'll come presently. But you must wait my time. I have other work to do ere I attend to you. Quick, men," he continued, addressing his followers, "the captive is gone. Search the house. Leave not one corner unsearched. Bring her here, if she is within these walls. And bring that infernal old hag Bessie. By the Immortal, but I'll reckon with her if she has let Anna escape her!"

They searched the house. Robertland had oft been searched before, but never more thoroughly than now. Every room, every chink and cranny that seemed to afford outlet, chambers where lay the gathered dust of years, vaults which had never known the sun, closets and chambers long unoccupied, far away up beneath the rafters and the slates—not a spot escaped the prying eyes of the searchers. Giant spiders saw them that had never before seen the face of man, and giant rats fled from them whose seclusion had, till now, been sacred to themselves.

But all in vain. Neither was found, neither Bessie nor Anna Montgomerie. Gabriel's brows darkened, and he clenched his hands, and he swore a great oath; and then he addressed himself to the clamouring Maxwells without the gate.

These, as Gabriel scanned them, were about thirty in number. A small force, indeed, with which to attack a heavy-walled old peel of the type of Robertland. Nothing short of cannon could have levelled the walls; nothing more formidable had the Maxwells than hagbuts. But there were other weapons. The Maxwells had time, and to spare, and they could afford to wait, and would wait too, if need be; and if they waited, no supplies

would be permitted to enter, and the strength of the garrison within would go down. A siege of thirty men by other thirty was out of the question, but Gabriel knew that if he refused the challenge to come forth and let the arbitrament of combat decide the issue, the thirty might multiply until they became forty or sixty. And with increased numbers there would be increased dangers—the battering-ram, and fire, and harrassment continually.

Gabriel was in no hurry to sally out. From loopholes and windows, and from within the heavy gates, he ordered a dropping fire to be maintained. The shots were returned by the Maxwells, and for an hour or two the combatants made such effective use of their inaccurate weapons as they could. The distance between them was not conducive to severe or fatal wounds; it was only sufficient to disable one or two of the combatants, and to suggest to the remainder the advisability of taking better care of themselves.

Gabriel grew more desperate as the hours passed on. Once more he gave rein to his feelings, and these, freed from control, ran away with him. Why should he not, he asked himself, bid the gates be opened and charge the Maxwells at the head of his men? Why should he not send speeding beyond the bourne—the unreturnable bourne—that William Cuninghame whom he had recognised without? His men were as numerous as were the assailants, they were as valorous, they were fresher and better rested, their horses were standing idle in the stalls and would be led forth without a shred of leg-weariness about them? Why, it was opportunity brought to the very doors of Robertland. The old laird across the sea—the young laird dead—for Gabriel would kill him as sure as the sun cleared the tree-tops—why, Robertland would be his in surer possession than ever.

And thinking thus, Gabriel grasped his sword the tighter, knit his brows the more sternly, and ordered his horses to be saddled. His orders were obeyed, willing hands led out the chargers, and under shelter of the house the men vaulted into the saddles.

Open the gates ! The massive bolts were pulled back, the heavy lock jarred as the big key turned in it ; the gates were rolled back on their hinges, and the Montgomeries were in the gateway ready. The Maxwells foresaw what was to eventuate, and springing to horseback they closed in thick array and prepared for the onslaught.

A moment's waiting, and with Gabriel leading them, the Montgomeries sallied forth. They opened out as they emerged. The men wanted room to wield their swords. They wanted to feel their individuality. These were the days of individuality in the fray, when man met man, and sword clashed upon sword, and when the strong arm encountered the strong arm. Daring, and skill, and strength were at a premium, and less likely to be neutralised than they are in these latter days of big battalions and long-reaching weapons of destruction.

There was a rush, a yell, a cheer, and the combatants joined in the shock. Horses went down. Men went down—some to rise no more ; some to creep wounded into the underbrush ; some to continue the fight on foot. A series of individual struggles, of gleaming blades and flashing firearms.

Gabriel had not far to seek for his antagonist. Straight and true he rode at William Cuninghame ; straight and true William Cuninghame rode at him. Gabriel was the stronger and the better-mounted, but what Cuninghame lacked in strength he made up in coolness and in skill. He parried the dangerous lounges of his antagonist effectually, managing his tired horse with dexterous manipulation. He was content to wait his opportunity. Not so Gabriel. He pressed on to the conflict ; he forced the fighting, and backwards step by step he drove his antagonist. Determined to end matters by one desperate onslaught, he spurred his horse forward until he and Cuninghame were face to face, within a few inches of one another ; received a severe sword thrust in his left shoulder, from which he never a moment flinched ; broke down the guard which

Cuninghame raised to shield his head ; and struck his antagonist to the ground.

Cuninghame was stunned and unconscious. Springing from his horse, Gabriel raised his sword to put an end to his foeman, when, suddenly, he was felled to the earth by the strong arm of Maxwell of Newark, and subsided, helpless and limp, by the side of the young laird of Robertland.

The fight was all but over, and it was brought more quickly to a close than the Montgomeries had anticipated. For while they were engaged in the struggle, there was a rush of men from the shelter of the woodland, and ere the Montgomeries could retrace their steps the heavy gates of Robertland were shut-to with a clang, and they on the outside.

What more could they do? Those who could fly, fled, and those who were stretched upon the grass remained where they were, and awaited what might eventuate.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THEY STAND IN THEIR LOT AT THE END OF THE DAYS.

WITHIN the panelling stood, or rather crouched Anna Montgomerie and the old woman. Darkness all around ; the same musty, suggestive atmosphere that had arisen from the vault ; gigantic cobwebs—these were the concomitants of the situation. The world was without, the noise and din and bustle, the rush and run and excitement of men preparing for the battle. To Anna the hiding place was as a tomb. No faint starry beam of sunshine shot athwart its gloom ; it was a veritable region of the endless shadow.

There were sounds heard—far away they were and indistinct, like the sounds heard in the dream land. They came as if from another sphere. Anna knew that the tread was the tread of men

on the oaken floors of Robertland, and on the stairs and in the hall ; that the voices were those of the men of the garrison—real voices, and gruff and loud ; that the cheering and the shouting without proceeded also from men of like passions with the others ; and that the ping and the rattle were those of firearms discharged hard by. And yet everything seemed so far away. Everything was muffled, and low, and dreamy.

Bessie held Anna by the hand, and they stood together, half-bent forward. The passage into which they had so speedily ushered themselves was contracted in height. Anna could not stand upright, nor could Bessie ; and therefore, perforce, they had to accommodate their attitude to their surroundings. Anna felt helpless. She had no alternative now to trusting the old woman.

They heard the room behind whose wainscoting they stood, searched. They heard voices, and footsteps, and words of disappointment, and the searchers running away again. And then there was silence awhile, save that only from across the dream land came the distant sounds of the conflict.

"Sit doon a wee," said Bessie to her companion—and Anna noticed that even Bessie's voice sounded compressed and muffled.

"Sit down ! Where am I to sit ?"

"Where'er ye can. Ye maun even sit on the grun', for this is no a place that's weel provided wi' sittin' accommodation."

Anna complied. She seated herself on the floor. Bessie remained standing.

"Why do you not sit down yourself, Bessie ?" Anna asked.

"Dinna be fear't, Miss. I'm no gaun tae rin awa' an' leave ye ; but I'm gaun oot in a wee tae see what they're daein'. Ye'll jist bide whaur ye are till I come back."

"But you must not leave me, Bessie. I'll go with you. I'm not afraid to run the risk of going out."

"No, ye're fear't, tho', tae rin the risk o' stayin' in. I thocht ye said ye had the heart o' a Cuninghame ?"

That was enough for Anna. "Well, Bessie," she replied, "if you want to go alone, I'll remain till you come back."

"Gie me yer haun', Miss, an' I'll let ye feel the spring, sae that if I never come back, ye can let yoursel' oot wi'oot assistance."

As she spoke Bessie took Anna Montgomerie's hand in her own, and placed it on the spring. Anna pressed it gently, and there shot in through a newly created chink, one strong beam of light.

"The panel's open noo," explained the old woman, "an' a' ye've got tae dae is to pull't tae ye."

"I understand, Bessie ; but come back as soon as you can and let me know what they're doin' in the house. I've a presentiment it's the young laird come to my relief."

"Maybe it is—I'll see, anyway. Forbye, I want tae see that sentinel. I'm thinkin' he's finished his vigil by this time."

"You'll not be long then ?"

"Not a minute longer than I can help."

Opening the panel, Bessie slipped out, and closed the aperture behind her. Anna was once more in the gloom. Gloomier than ever seemed her hiding place ; but she fortified herself against the influence of the darkness by the reflection that she was half a Cuninghame. It was the old woman's suggestion, but she adopted it, probably because her place of concealment was in the house of Robertland, and because she cherished the belief that William Cuninghame was among those who were knocking at the outer gate for admission. There might have been another reason. Another suggested itself, but Anna refused to draw any store of courage from the future.

She felt the intensity of the gloom. It was the personification of the depths of darkness. It possessed her, it entered her soul. Darkness, Egyptian in its profundity, darkness that could be felt ! Darkness deep as the shades of Tartarus, omni-present as that which hovered over the valley of the shadow ! She longed for Bessie's return.

Bessie was not long absent. Her story was soon told. The house was being attacked, and Gabriel and his men were defending it. What hope was there that the attacking party should succeed? None whatever, so long as the defenders remained within the shelter of its walls and bulwarks. Had Bessie recognised any of those without the walls? No, she had recognised none. But there was a stout, burly man who was in command, and with him a younger man as eager on the fray as he. What was the younger man like? He was like the old laird of Robertland, as he was quarter-a-century ago, and he was mounted on a strong black horse.

A second time, and a third, Bessie went forth. But she had nothing more to tell. Still the same story. The conflict was proceeding as before. Had she seen the sentinel? Aye, she had seen him—he was dead and gone, his head cleft to the chin—his soul with his fathers.

The old woman was not long gone when next she went forth; nor did she enter the recess.

"Come," she said, "come wi' me an' I'll shew ye a sicht that'll gladden yer een. Gabriel's musterin' his men for a charge."

Anna obeyed. She was glad to exchange the darkness for the light; and though the charge of armed men was not to her liking, she did not hesitate to follow the old woman to a point of vantage.

From a window high up in the castle wall they witnessed the scene. The struggle took place beneath their eyes. Anna could not withdraw her gaze from the sight. It fascinated her. She almost admired Gabriel Montgomerie as, sword in hand, he sallied out at the head of his men. That, she told herself, was the true Gabriel Montgomerie—her captor at his best. She could almost have forgiven him his cruelty—he looked so commanding and so noble. He never flinched from the shock. He rushed gladly to it, his sword blade bright gleaming against the sun. She saw it wave.

And then the forces met, and Anna saw Gabriel, hand to

hand, fighting with William Cuninghame. Ah, the chasing excitements of that brief encounter! Stroke and thrust, parry and guard, nothing escaped her. Her heart beat high, albeit it was sore, as Cuninghame was forced back yard by yard, grimly contesting each inch as he yielded his ground. She shut her eyes against the sight of his unhorsing, and when she opened them again it was to see the garrison broken and flying across the country, Gabriel Montgomerie and William Cuninghame stretched upon the grass with their faces upturned to the sun, and the gates of Robertland being closed from within by her own father aided by a score of willing hands. A few moments more, and Anna was locked in the embrace of her father.

Both Gabriel Montgomerie and William Cuninghame were severely wounded. When the last sounds of the fray had died away, Sir Neill, accompanied by Anna, and followed by Bessie, went out to render assistance. They found Patrick Maxwell of Newark in silent satisfaction at the result.

"You have made quick work of it," observed Sir Neill to the laird of Newark.

"We have. We generally do make quick work of it," returned Maxwell. "But I don't know whether we are done yet. Is there any life left, think you, in that—in that Montgomerie there?" and he pointed to Gabriel with his sword.

"I hope there is," returned Sir Neill, "for, with all his faults, Gabriel has proved himself a gallant man."

"Perhaps he has," was the laird of Newark's response, "but he will prove himself so no more."

"You cannot slay him in cold blood?"

"Why not, Sir Neill?"

"Because you cannot. He has lost his charge, he has been sorely wounded—surely the atonement is sufficient?"

"He has forfeited his life, too. Think you that I came all the way here from Newark to spare the life of a Montgomerie once I had him in my power? No sir. He deserves to die; and die he shall, if he be not already dead."

"Spare him," interceded Anna, "oh spare him. I ask you to let him go free—I who was his captive, and who should rejoice in vengeance upon him if any one should. He has wronged me more than ever he has wronged you."

"I might have known as much," growled the Laird of Newark. "Hawks winna pick oot kawks' een, and a Montgomerie must spare a Montgomerie, even when he has wrought well for his death, and filled up the cup to the full. But why should you wish to spare him?"

"He is my cousin," returned Anna, "and if he were not, no man who has taken his life in his hand on the field of combat, deserves to be slain in cold blood. It is against all rules of fair feud."

"Humph! I suppose you must have your way. His life is yours," curtly returned Maxwell, turning his back upon them. "Thus," he continued, as he walked away, "thus I am balked of my revenge, and have wasted two days for nothing."

The result of a hurried consultation was that a rude horse litter was improvised, and, stretched upon it, Gabriel Montgomerie and William Cuninghame were borne away to Lainshaw. Bessie declined to accompany Anna. She had lived in Robertland all her life, she said, and she would live there to the close.

"An' may a curse licht upon me," she added, "if ever, wi' my een open, I enter the dwellin' o' a Montgomerie. Forbye that," she added, with a distant attempt at a smile, "I maun bide here an' set the hoose in order for the young laird. Wha kens but he'll be bringing a bonnie bride tae't, ane o' thae days?"

A fortnight later, restored to convalescence, William Cuninghame met Gabriel Montgomerie in the dining room of Lainshaw. In the presence of Sir Neill and Anna they dared not evince their hostility, but when Cuninghame entered and found Gabriel seated on a couch, he scowled savagely upon him, and Gabriel returned the scowl with interest.

Gabriel was by no means in the best of humour. He felt his position too keenly to cultivate the social amenities; and he

wearied for the breaking of the coming morning when he should take his departure for Hazlehead, and thence to parts unknown. The continent of Europe was his destination—that seething pot of racial and family jealousies, where soldiers of fortune were ever at home, and where these military stormy petrels had opportunity, and to spare, to skim the raging billows of strife. But ere he took his departure he had consented, on Anna's solicitation, to join, once and only once, Sir Neill, and Captain Stewart, and Anna herself, in social intercourse. Woman-like, Anna had forgotten the past. The sword thrust and the felling blow of Maxwell of Newark had driven her own troubles out of her mind ; and though she could not forget, she could at least forgive. And, Christian-like, she had forgiven.

Gabriel had not bargained to meet the young laird of Robertland—that was a surprise that Anna had in store for him. Not a pleasant surprise either. Gabriel would fain have left the room when Cuninghame entered—he would, indeed, have preferred to renew the contest which the sword of Maxwell had interrupted—but he was in the toils of conventionality and sociality, and he could not free himself from them.

Like his late antagonist, William Cuninghame ill-liked the rencontre ; but, like him again, he could not escape. He did not affect anything other than hostility—for had not Gabriel lorded it over his own and his brother's dwelling, these twelve months and more, while his father was a fugitive on a foreign shore and he, to all intents and purposes, a wanderer on the face of his native Ayrshire ? In Gabriel he saw the author of his woes ; in Cuninghame, Gabriel saw the cause of his misfortunes ; and it is no wonder that they scowled upon one another. They would have been more than mortal had they done aught else, and both were mortal, and that exceedingly.

"Come, come, William," said Sir Neill, as he saw the scowl on Cuninghame's face, "remember that Lainshaw is neutral ground."

"I had all but forgotten it," replied Cuninghame, turning towards his uncle and averting his gaze from the face of Gabriel.

"And as for you, Gabriel," continued Sir Neill, "you can afford to lay down your arms for one night. This night, at least, we are to let bygones be bygones."

"I am afraid there is no alternative," responded Gabriel, "and I must do with things as things will do with me."

"The true doctrine of a true fatalist," observed Captain Stewart, who was quick to see, and to relieve the strain of the situation, "and a very comfortable doctrine, too, if you can but believe in it. The worst of it is that, when you think you have a hold of it, it slips from your grasp. I've seen the day for all that, when I thought I could control my own destiny; and perhaps," added Captain Stewart, "perhaps I could, if I had the chance again, and my experience to boot."

"That's where the evil lies," said Sir Neill. "We won't take the experience of others, but must learn for ourselves. And what is worse, we don't always learn from our own experience; at least, we don't profit by what we do learn."

"If I had had my experience of the last three weeks, a year ago"—it was Gabriel who spoke—"I'd have known better than leave Robertland when I did. I'd have sat still behind the walls, and I'd have been sitting there yet."

"That's just what I say," interposed Captain Stewart, who saw that Gabriel was touching dangerous ground; "you have had to purchase your experience."

"How could I know," returned Gabriel, "that the house was to be taken by strategy?"

"All is fair in war," replied Captain Stewart, "and that is one of the things you might have known from the experience of others. Why, from the earliest days down to the taking of Robertland, strategy has been the best half of warfare. Joshua knew that when he enticed the men of Ai out of their city."

"And I know it now, too. But it wasn't straightforward fighting," Gabriel replied, somewhat hotly.

Sir Neill felt that the taunt was levelled at him and he took it up.

"Gabriel," he said, speaking sternly, "you have no right to speak so. Robertland was not taken until you had been unhorsed and lay senseless and helpless on the ground. Until now I have not spoken a word as to the past, but when you speak of straight-forwardness you will be good enough to remember the immediate cause of the attack upon Robertland."

Gabriel was about to retort when his eye caught that of Anna Montgomerie, and mastering his feelings with an effort, he forbore to recriminate. He knew now that he had done wrong, and he admitted it to himself. Experience had been his teacher, and the unselfish kindness of the woman he had wronged.

"This wont do at all," said Captain Stewart, again interposing in the cause of amity. "We were to forget the past for one night, and here we are doing nothing but talking of it. If the past could be blotted out," and there was a ring of bitterness in the tones of the speaker, "it would be a God's blessing in nine cases out of ten."

"There I differ from you, Captain Stewart," replied Sir Neill. "It is a God's blessing rather that we have a past to remember. Even should it do no more than humble us and teach us, it is worth all it has cost."

"That may be so in your case, Sir Neill," rejoined Captain Stewart, "but not in mine. I would to God my past could no more be recalled."

"What more yours than any other body's?" asked Gabriel bluntly.

"Perhaps no more, my friend," replied Captain Stewart, "perhaps no more than yours, or than any other body's. But for me, I would rather let the past alone than that it should come up before me to remind me of what I once was, and how I fell from my exalted station."

"Well, I don't know anything about that," rejoined Gabriel, "but if it weren't for experience and ambition the world wouldn't be worth living in."

"Experience and ambition!" said Captain Stewart. "Why

do you bracket these two? Experience is sent to kill ambition. The one is, or ought to be, the death of the other, and ambition is the curse of him that hath it."

"I have to learn that yet from experience," said Gabriel. "Just now I don't believe it."

"You don't?" returned Captain Stewart. "Then listen to me. You know me as Captain Stewart. Captain Stewart I am, and none beside. But I was not always so known. I do not tell you this to gratify an idle curiosity, but to teach you the curse that clings to ambition. Believe me, young man, if ambition be your motto for this life you will live to see the day when you will curse it from the bottom of your heart."

"Perhaps so, sir; that remains to be seen," was Gabriel's answer. "But I shall be glad to hear what you have to say; and if you can convince me that ambition has been your curse, who knows whether I may not lay the lesson to heart?"

"Years ago," rejoined Captain Stewart, speaking in tones so serious and so dignified that the attention of all was rivetted upon him, "years ago when I was an unknown soldier of fortune, I cherished the ambition to dominate events, to direct the destinies of my country, to hold nobles and men of high degree as a ransom, and I bid boldly for the execution of my design. At the Council table, where the King sat himself surrounded by his councillors, I accused the regent Morton of complicity in the death of Darnley, and I brought the old lion, as men called him, to die the death. The murder—the murder which he had himself designed—wrought justice upon him. By royal charter I was created Earl of Arran. The baronies of Hamilton and Kinnell became mine, and all the lands of the Hamiltons in five wide counties of Scotland. Nobles came and went at my bidding. Those whom I would honour, the king honoured, and those who did not, or would not serve my ends, were condemned and ostracised from court. The Ayrshire nobility—Eglinton and Glencairn, Boyd and even Ochiltree—I bid stand on the one side. For a time, subsequent to the Raid of Ruthven, I fell

into the hands of the men of the Band, but even the youngest here is old enough to remember how I trod down those who were risen against me, and how I tamed the pride of the Earl of Glencairn. Argyle was deposed from his exalted station as Lord High Chancellor, and I was appointed Chancellor in his room. For the promotion of amity between the countries of England and of Scotland I, now the Lieutenant of the kingdom, was deputed to meet with Lord Hunsdon, a cousin of Queen Elizabeth herself, and arrange terms of mutual consent. Five thousand men rode in my retinue south to Foulden Kirk, near Berwick, that August day. Five members of the Privy Council, men of the highest rank and the purest blood that Scotland could produce, were attendant upon me. The destinies of the kingdom were in my hand. When I returned to the capital I deposed the governor of Edinburgh Castle and was welcomed to possession of it with the booming of cannon—a tribute never paid before save to kings and princes of the blood—and the acclamations of thousands of the people. That was the zenith of my power, but I was not content. I wreaked the rigours of the law upon the Presbyterians; the Estates I handled for the ratification of my will; I set my foot upon the neck of my kingdom. Had I but been content, all might have been well. But the extent and greatness of my power begat disaffection and jealousy; and a paltry affair in the middle border marches, in which Lord Russell lost his life, was the beginning of my undoing. I was thrown a prisoner into the Castle of St. Andrews. Even then it was not too late. By planning and promising I obtained my freedom, I secured again the confidence of the king, I grasped anew at the reins of office. Again I tried to beat down opposition and make circumstances subservient to my will. But all in vain. The banished Earls—whom I myself had sent into captivity, many of them—returned in force so potent that I could resist no longer. I fell from my pinnacle. With but one single attendant I fled to the Highlands; I was deprived of my titles, my honours; the Chancellorship was given to another, and, by public proclamation,

I was declared an enemy to my country, and after many wanderings and many privations, I, who once all but wielded the power of the sceptre and of the keys, was permitted—I was permitted, I who held in my hand the lives of the men who were spared to permit me—to retire into Ayrshire and hide my head from the public gaze. What does it all amount to now? Save Sir Neill Montgomerie, here, I have hardly a friend to whom I can turn, and my one fear is that my friendship should tend to the injury of the man who has not scrupled to avow that he returns it in the day of my adversity. I dare not go abroad; I dare not mingle with those with whom I once associated; but must remain here in quiet and seclusion, until I die, and be accursed of those who once grovelled at my feet. Young man,” continued Captain Stewart, addressing himself directly to Gabriel Montgomerie, “You say that ambition is your pole-star? Ambition is no pole-star; it is but the marsh light that entices the traveller to his destruction; it is but the wild fire of the bog and the muirland, that lights up the path to an earthly hell. Turn from it, shun it ere it be too late, else the fate that has befallen others greater than thou art, shall be thine also.”

A long silence followed. Even Gabriel for a while was hushed into stillness, and he sat and mused on what he had heard. At length he spoke.

“I thank you, sir,” he said, “for your counsel, and I shall not forget what you have said.”

“Do not,” replied Captain Stewart, “and if you wish to win a way to fair and honourable, and honest renown, I shall give you letters to my brother at the court of France; and the fault will be your own if you henceforward rust in idleness.”

“I thank you again, sir,” returned Gabriel, “and I gladly accept your offer.”

They stood in their lot in the end of the days.

Till the end of his days Sir Neill Montgomerie lived quietly in Lainshaw. When he was an old man, and when the echoes of the feud were growing faint, when angry passions were cooled,

and when the Montgomeries who had ridden and fought in the strife had grown stiff with age and inaction, the Lady Elizabeth returned to her home. Changed was she, as she might well be. Her hair was silvered, and her eye had lost its brightness, and her step was slow ; and she lived but to die. She was to all intents and purposes a prisoner in her own house ; for though the Montgomeries had ceased to pursue her actively, they had sworn a great oath against her, that she should not look upon the face of a Montgomerie and live thereafter. Her husband was a true man to her till the close ; and when she went to her own place, he mourned for her for what she was, and forgot what she had done.

To Robertland when the autumn days were shortening went Anna Montgomerie—a Montgomerie no longer. Her heart had been with the kindred of her mother's house all along, and, allied to William Cuninghame, she bore the name which her mother had exchanged for that of Montgomerie. Old Bessie welcomed her as a brand plucked from the burning, and lived to take to her arms an heir to the name and the possessions of Robertland. Thither, too, when other four years had gone, came the old laird himself, chastened and saddened by his enforced residence on the continent, and thankful that through the powerful mediation of the Earl of Glencairn he had been permitted to look once more upon the fields and the plains, and the banks of the streams that he called his own.

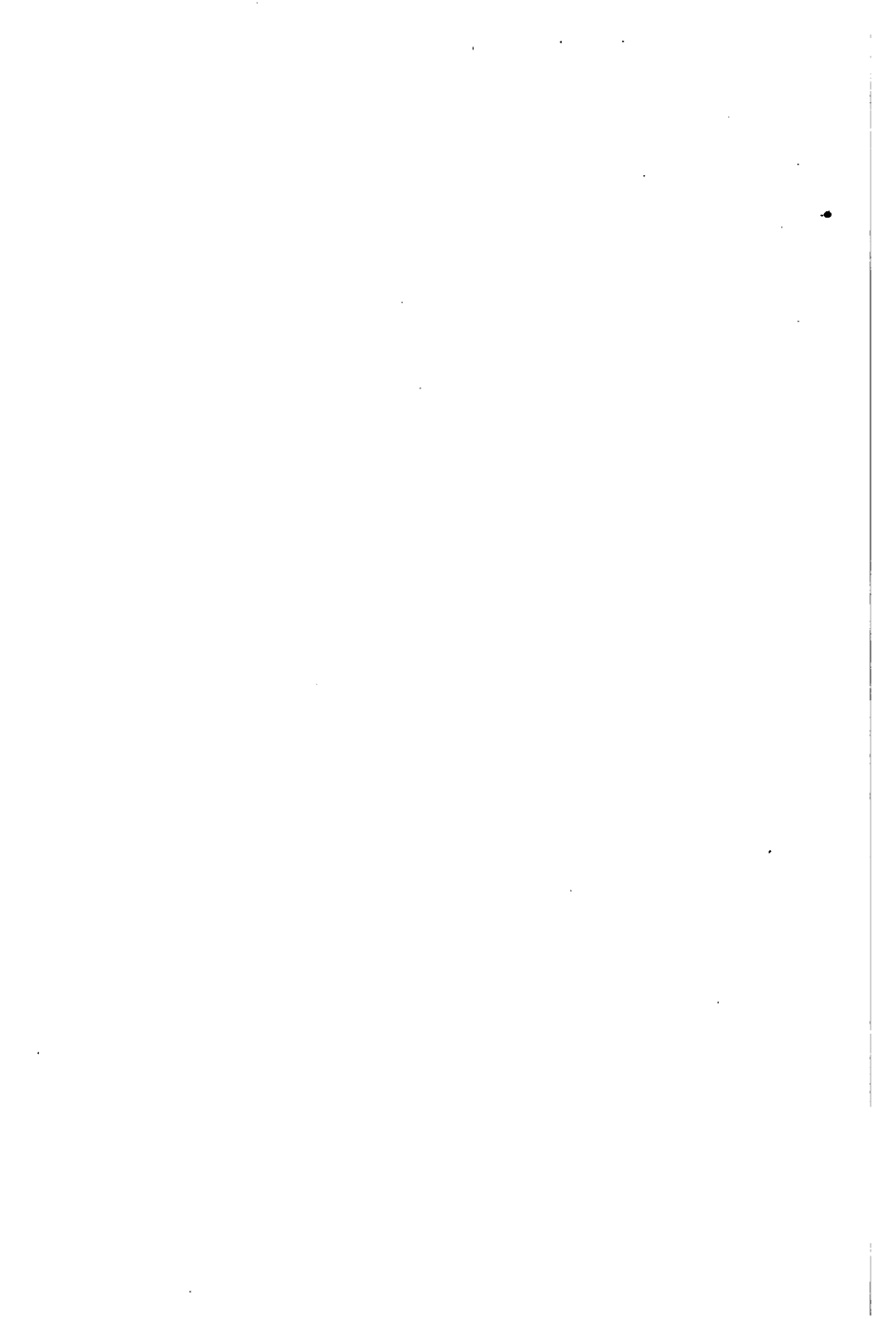
In the quiet of Ochiltree lived Captain Stewart, till, in peace, and lulled to rest by the breeze in the tree tops, he fell asleep, leaving behind him the record of a chequered career, and carrying his hopes for the future with him beyond the tomb. His path through life had been like that of the sun on one of the changing days of the spring. Breaking through the clouds he had shone in his strength until cloudland had taken again the mastery and wrapped him in its shadow. And his end was as peaceful as a western sunset can be.

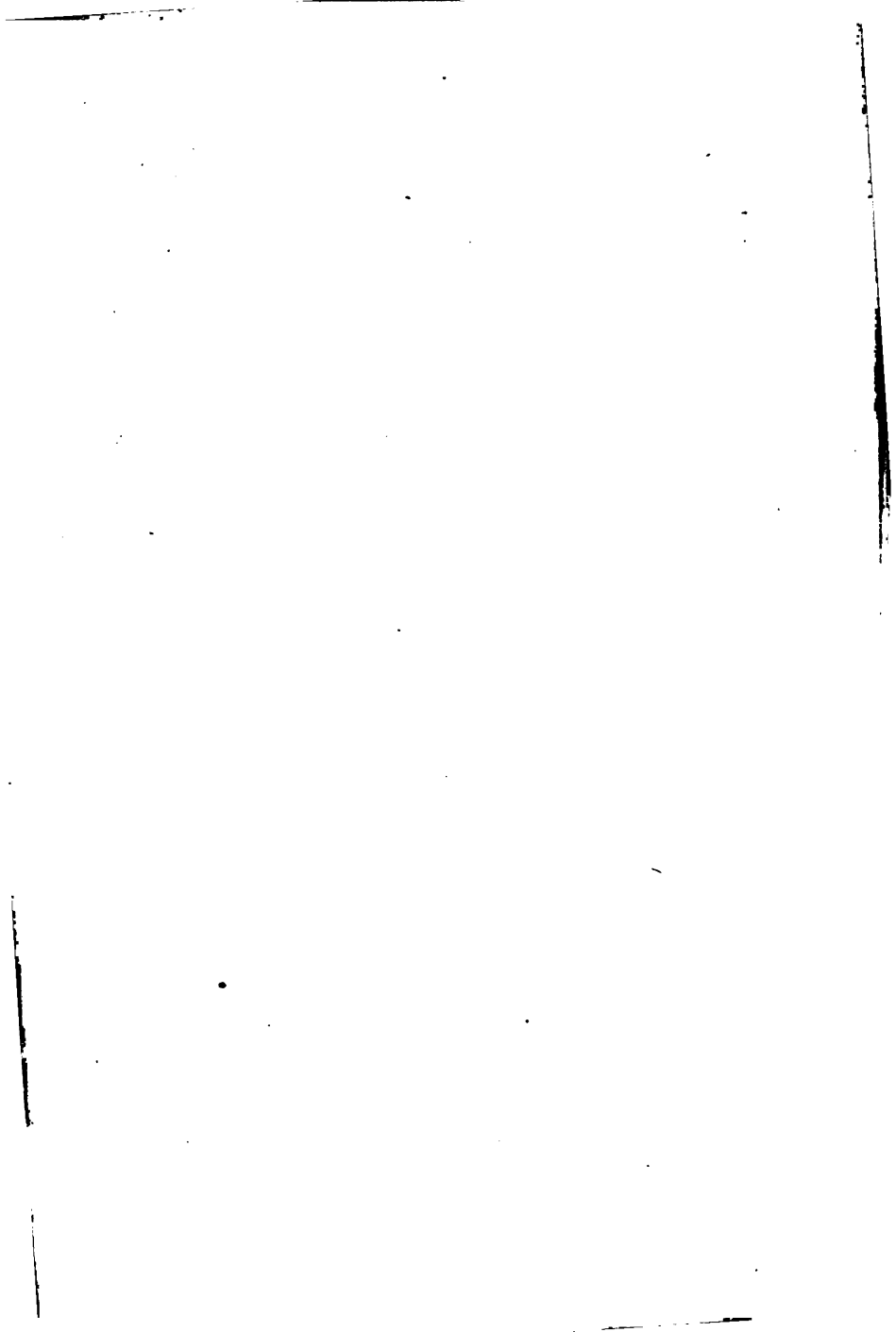
They stood in their lot at the end of the days. Three round

centuries have rolled their course since the events I have related transpired. In their silent vaults or in their grass grown graves the men and women I have recalled to the scene, have long since mingled their ashes with those of their kindred. They were real men and women—not the fanciful creations of the romancist. They were animated by the same loves and hates, beset by the same trials and temptations, stimulated by the same ambitions and rivalries, guided in their destinies by the same powers as you, reader, and I. It fell to them to play their part in the evolution of Ayrshire story; and if they sinned they suffered, and you must therefore judge them charitably. Theirs' was not the light that we enjoy. They dwelt in rude times and amid rude surroundings and associations; and they fulfilled their mission in life as their hearts and their promptings dictated.

Between Ormuzd and Ahriman, the powers of light and darkness, they had their own battle to wage and their own trials to undergo; and as they have long since given in their account to a merciful Judge, be ye also merciful when you sit in judgment on them.

THE END







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